Know Who to Shoot

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Know Who to Shoot

by julomaiboulomai

Summary

Juno, Peter, and the crew of the Carte Blanche have found themselves back on Brahma. The planet is in the midst of a full rebellion, and war takes its toll. Friends and enemies both new and old surround them, and getting out with their family intact is no simple task.

A tale of the end of a war, the beginning of peace, and all the people caught up in the middle.

Notes

HERE IT IS, AT LONG LAST. MY 2019/20 PENUMBRA PODCAST MINIBANG FIC. I cannot believe this fucking thing, honestly. It has so much plot, what the hell. It's also got so much lore and backstory that didn't make it in, because if I'd actually written all the plot that I *had* thought of, it'd be 80-100k, and I felt like 37k was overboard enough.

A HUGE thank you, as always, to everyone in the TPP Minibang Discord server, for all your support. This wouldn't exist without y'all!

And of course, a second, even HUGER thank you to my artists, Sarcasm and Taylor, who produced illustrations of this fic! I'm so excited about this art, you guys don't even know. Thank you so much <3 <3.

And finally, a third, EQUALLY HUGE thank you specifically to Illuminahsti, who beta'd this fic for me!!! It wouldn't be what it is without them.

Here, for those who are interested, is a link to the playlist I made while working on this fic. The first song, "The Guide to Success", is the source of the title of this fic.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Never say what you really feel
Why make a choice when it's safer just to make a deal?
Stay away from what causes a stir or offends
Keep your heart silent, don't dispute
And if it turns violent, make sure you know who to shoot

"The Guide to Success", Joe Iconis

***

Juno stands in the crowd and looks up at his lover standing pale-faced and stalwart in front of a firing squad, and he wishes they'd never come to Brahma. He'd always imagined Hyperion City to be the galaxy's greatest shithole city, but the city of Brahma is at least as bad, and it covers the *whole planet*. And now this.

It had all been going so well. For a given value of *well,* anyway. The crew of the Carte Blanche has an incredible collective capacity for chaos—but they're more or less adjusted to that by now, and they'd been handling the state of affairs on Brahma pretty well. And then Eshe, who had slipped Juno's notice entirely, slipped her guard as well and had gone hunting. She hadn't found what she'd been looking for, but she had found the so-called Angel of Brahma.

Which brought them here. Juno closes his eye for a brief moment. The Chief of Enforcement in his ostentatious cloth-of-gold coat is still pontificating somewhere to the side of the stage where Peter's about to be executed, so there are a few minutes left. And then he thinks, no: he can't afford to lose even a second. He'll regret it for the rest of his life if he's not watching when it happens. So he looks again, and finds that somehow, despite half-mask and hair dye, Peter's eyes have found him in the crowd. Somehow, in the mass of at least 200 people gathered to watch the execution of the fabled Angel, some afraid and some angry, some feeling righteous and some demoralized, everyone pushing and moving and shouting, pressed shoulder-to-shoulder… Peter's gaze has found Juno like a homing missile.

The look on his face is… complicated. Juno hopes that that means that someone, *anyone*, has a plan. Then the black corner of his brain that he's never going to be able to entirely exorcise reminds him that hope is dangerous. If he lets himself believe that there's a way to stop this, it'll be twice as crushing when those bolts strike Peter's chest and

steal breath and life, as quickly and easily as Peter's ever stolen the wallet from someone's pocket. So he pushes down the hope and the scrabbling feral animal part of him that's screaming to *do something,* and he just stands there. Stares up into Peter's eyes. Waits to watch him die.

Peter smiles at him and Juno smiles back, because that's a reflex at this point, no matter what he's feeling. His heart is in his throat; his heart is standing on the stage in front of him, as brave as anything he's ever seen.

The stage explodes.

On instinct, Juno shouts "DOWN!" and drags the person nearest to him to the ground as he flings himself down. Just in time: a volley of blaster bolts fly over their heads, and past the ringing in his ears Juno thinks he can hear the muffled *thump* of bodies hitting the ground; there goes the firing squad. He pops his head up slightly to try to get a look around, but there's dust in the air and people are starting to scream and run. Pandemonium breaks out rapidly, and he rolls over to the person he'd grabbed—Cassandra Thalas, he discovers. He hadn't realized she'd stayed by him as he fought through the crowd for a better view. He probably shouldn't have agreed to bring her along with him in the first place, but as it happens, between his transferred guilt from the *other* Cassandra he knew and this Cassandra's really killer puppy dog eyes, he hadn't been able to say no.

"Are you okay?" he asks, knowing that he's shouting but only barely able to hear himself over the noise.

She nods, her eyes wide and dark in her pale face. One of her hands is resting on her swollen belly, and she'd fallen on her side to protect it. "We need to run," she replies. Juno only understands because of Vespa's lessons in lip-reading these past few months; her soft voice is lost entirely. "We'll be trampled!"

Juno doesn't waste the time to agree with her. He braces himself and pushes up to get to his feet, and then offers her a hand, hauling her up off the ground. Once she's steady on her feet, he takes a single moment to glance back toward the stage, to try to peer through the dissipating smoke and cloud of dust and see what's become of Peter. At first glance, nothing; there's no movement, and the only figures he sees lying slumped in the wreckage are wearing the stark black of New Kinshasa's armed forces. No body in prisoner's white. Peter has disappeared, and maybe it's just Juno's eye playing a trick, but he lets

himself accept the fragment of hope and begins to shepherd Cassandra toward the edge of Brahana Square where they can escape out into the streets. The crowd is all headed that way at speed, so it's more a matter of making sure no one jostles her than trying to shove through the masses. Neither of them is exactly tall, but Juno is stronger and isn't devoting most of his attention to ensuring he doesn't catch an elbow in the belly, so he wraps an arm around Cassandra's shoulders and tucks her close to shelter her.

Around them people are running and shouting, waving their hands in the air. Some are standing stock still, staring, being shoved by the people passing them. Still others are lying on the ground, prone or curled up; one woman is crouched down with her hands over her ears, crying. Juno wishes he could stop, but he has a responsibility here. If he can't help Peter, he's damn well going to make sure Cassandra gets out alive—her and her unborn child. So he closes the door on the part of his mind that's screaming at him to *help them* and focuses just on helping *her*.

It feels like an hour but is probably only a few minutes before they pass through the dingy stone archways that surround the square and out into the surrounding road. There's no space for cars to pass or hovercars to take off, so everyone's continuing on foot, but Juno pulls Cassandra into the lee in the tide of humanity formed by one of the pillars and says to her, "We need to find transport."

She hesitates, then says, in a voice that's now audible as the immediate clamour fades, "My father?"

Juno decides not to raise the possibility that her father might be dead —he's the Chief of Enforcement, and had been at the centre of the blast—or the fact that even if he's *not* dead he'll be furious with them both for being here. They'd snuck past him to attend the execution, but she's probably right that he's their best chance of getting out safely. "Alright. But come here—we need to wait for things to calm down."

She comes easily into his arms and he holds her close, keeping an eye out over her shoulder while she shelters against his body. Fortunately, no one running past has any real interest in them; they're fleeing for safety—and anonymity in the wake of the attack. Juno would be doing so himself, if he weren't with Cassandra.

As the flood of civilians slows to a trickle, and then comes to a stop, a constable emerges from the square with his blaster drawn and turns to

point it at them as soon as he realizes they're there. In the time it took him, Juno could've easily pulled his own—concealed, even—weapon, and shot the man dead. But no matter; the state of constabulary training isn't exactly his most pressing concern.

Cassandra turns her face away from Juno's chest and toward the constable when she hears the whine of his blaster being armed, and he blanches and immediately points his weapon at the ground. "Lady Cassandra!" he says. "What—"

"Constable," she says, and steps free of Juno's arms; he lets her go. "Thank goodness."

"My lady, are you alright?" he asks, flipping the safety back on his weapon and reholstering it. Past the constable's shoulder as he focuses on Cassandra, Juno makes eye contact with a person peering around a building at them. Their face is covered with a half-mask and their hair with a bandana, but the burgundy paint around their eyes marks them as a member of the Rebellion, and as soon as they see him looking—and that the constable is occupied—they dart across the street and into another blind alley.

"I'm fine," Cassandra is assuring the constable, meanwhile. "Is—is anyone dead? Those blaster bolts—"

"A number of constables are down," the man says. "But your father is alive, my lady. Please, come with me; we've got to get you to safety."

"Shouldn't you be finding whoever did this?" Juno interrupts, as harsh as he can be. "You've just told us that they *killed* constables."

The constable in front of them hesitates, looks at Cassandra, at Juno, and then over his shoulder into the square. "The lady's safety is the priority," he says after a moment. "There are others who will find and eliminate the perpetrators."

Eliminate. Even in Hyperion, the cops would have said *apprehend*. But then, Brahma isn't Mars. "Fine," Juno says, putting on disapproval as best he can. "Let's go, then."

They don't cut directly back into the square; of course not. The Rebellion almost certainly still has at least one sniper posted to rain chaos as the constables try to regroup. Instead they cut along the road to the right, toward where the stage had been set up but outside of the square.

Already, constables are starting to arrive en masse to the scene of the bombing, black beginning to overwhelm peasant brown among the people still on the street. People fleeing into the nearest building to avoid notice helps with that—no one wants to be caught out after a Rebellion attack. As it is, Juno catches a glimpse of a constable standing with their foot on a prone man's shoulder, their weapon in his face as they make some demand of an answer or proof of innocence. It's an effort not to scowl openly; he has to look away.

They round a corner onto a wider street, this one entirely filled with Enforcement people and their cars. People are bustling around, some carrying weapons, others shoving "suspects" into the backs of cars with little concern for those who smack their heads. There are also members of the Enforcement Corps in the dark grey that signifies that they're non-combatants taking dictation for reports and triaging wounded constables. Heads turn toward them, and in moments another four black-clad constables have formed up around Cassandra like some sort of honour guard. Juno finds himself on the inside of the circle rather than on the outside, somewhat to his surprise, but with Cassandra is sticking to him like glue they can't exactly leave him out.

In the centre of the bustle, sitting on a folding chair that had been produced hastily form *somewhere* is Ophion, Chief of Enforcement himself, still in gold but now covered in dust and looking quite scuffed; there's a harried-looking paramedic hovering over him, apparently trying to clean a wound on his head that's still trickling a thin trail of blood down the side of his face. He keeps swatting her hands away, and when he spots Cassandra being escorted through the crowd he surges to his feet and strides toward them, his face going thunderous.

"Cassandra!" he says, as he draws close, and shoves straight past their little guard to grab her chin and tilt her face, now twisted with discomfort, up toward him. "What are you doing here? I am *quite* certain that I had forbidden you from coming."

"I wanted to see, father," Cassandra says, her voice going even softer than before. At her side, Juno shifts, unable to stop himself, and Ophion's eyes fall on him.

"Steel," he says. "I assume you dragged my daughter out here?"

Juno shakes his head. "More like she dragged me, sir. She *does* have a mind of her own."

The twist of Ophion's mouth says he disagrees, which Juno already knew, but it's not like the reminder is going to make him hate the guy *more*. He pretty much hates him as much as is physically possible already. "A likely story," he says. "And how am I to be sure that you had nothing to do with this? That you didn't coerce my daughter into coming here so that she would be in the line of fire from that gang of insurgent scum?"

"Father, please," Cassandra interjects. "Juno was with me the whole time, he protected me when the stage blew up. He had no idea and nothing to do with it."

Ophion's disbelief is clear on his face, but he doesn't reply. Instead he shakes his head and finally lets go of Cassandra's face; Juno can already see the livid spots on her jaw where he'd gripped hard enough to bruise. "You're going back to headquarters," he tells her, instead of addressing her defence of Juno.

"Yes, father," Cassandra says, and bows her head so that the bruises vanish into shadow.

Juno steps forward and touches her elbow lightly, drawing her attention. "Come on," he says quietly. "We're not doing any good here, and you should sit down."

"Thank you, Juno."

Cassandra follows Juno and a constable over to one of the cars, which takes off as soon as they're inside and seated, first up a few levels into the airspace reserved for Enforcement vehicles, and then across Brahma toward the main headquarters of the Enforcement Corps, a sprawling grey complex of boxy buildings that Juno has called home for the past couple of months, since he'd been sent undercover by the Rebellion. It's not the most pleasant of places to live, but Juno's lived in worse and more dismal—honestly, the thing he misses the most as compared to the Carte Blanche is the company. Seeing Peter, even at a distance, is enough to remind him how much he misses his partner, and he doesn't relish going back to his own cold room, still uncertain if the man who usually sleeps by his side is still alive.

He can't complain too much, though. He's got a better standard of living than *most* of Brahma, even now that people can live more or less out in the open again. Not that everyone does; even the law-abiding tend to stay out from under Enforcement's eye, for reasons that Juno has just had the pleasure of witnessing. He's definitely living

better than the Rebellion, who are stuck hiding underground like sewer rabbits. But… damn it if he doesn't wish he was going *home*.

The hovercar sets down in the centre-most yard of the complex and lets Cassandra and Juno out, then jets off back toward the square, presumably to continue looking for Peter. They're not going to find him, so long as he's alive—he's too damn good, him and the rest of the Rebellion—but Juno hopes they enjoy the goose chase.

There are Enforcement members all around, most of them keeping a surreptitious eye on Cassandra, but none of them step forward to volunteer any actual help. Juno shakes off his maudlin thoughts as best he can and says, "Do you want an escort to medical?"

She shakes her head, although to his eye she looks a bit pale. "I'd rather return to my rooms—though an escort there would be welcome."

Juno nods and offers his arm, which she takes with a soft look of gratitude. They both know the way, and stroll together through a door—once Cassandra has turned her face up to the facial rec camera to grant them entry—and into the halls of the compound. The whole compound is utilitarian grey plasteel pre-fab buildings, constructed in a hurry by the surface contingent of the Enforcement Corps, and in the 2 years since, very little had been done to make it any less bleak. The walls are blank and the plain support beams are visible at regular intervals in the halls; the doors, also grey, are decorated—if it could be called that—with only a facial rec camera to the left with its blinking red light, waiting for someone to approach and be identified. There's not much sound in the halls, people passing by on quiet feet now and then, their noses bent toward sheafs of paper or datapads. A single constable greets them as he passes going the other way, and Cassandra smiles at him, small and warm.

It's impossible to know for sure what part of the building they're in at any time; the different sections are marked out with a coloured tag on the entrances between them, and the doors are numbered in each section, but otherwise you just have to *know*. Rita had had to hack into the database for a map when they'd first arrived, and even that was so cobbled together that he'd had to call her for help after getting lost about a dozen times in the first few weeks. But he's gotten used to it, sort of, and Cassandra's quarters are a familiar destination—they're not that far from his and Rita's, either, which is nice. It'll mean a short walk back to check in once he's dropped Cassandra off.

But when they arrive at the door marked *846C*, Cassandra doesn't bid Juno a polite goodbye once she's unlocked it with another straight-faced glance at the facial rec camera. Instead she says, "Come in for a moment?"

"Of course," he says, and escorts her in, the door sliding shut again behind them. "Did… you need something?"

She pauses in the middle of the room—her small sitting room, a plain space with a single black couch and an armchair, a heating unit in the corner for the colder nights. To the left is a door leading to a kitchen and dining space, which Juno knows from past visits, and the right a hall leading to a washroom and two bedrooms, one now converted to a nursery. No windows,, so the light that falls on Cassandra's expression—soft, complicated, filled with an odd compassion and a hint of pity—is totally artificial.

"The Angel of Brahma?" she says.

Juno blinks. "I… what?"

"I think you know what I mean," she says. "Please, don't lie to me, Juno. I saw your face, standing in that crowd—you knew—no, you *know* him."

"How would that even be possible?" Juno says, shoving down the rising panic. She's too damn perceptive. "I've been here the entire time I've been on Brahma. I've *never* met with members of the Rebellion."

She purses her lips. "Maybe so," she says, "and I believe you had nothing to do with today's attack—I was honest when I said so to my father. But I *know* what I saw on your face."

There are a lot of ways that this could go, but really it comes down to two things: Juno can lie, or he can tell the truth. Looking at Cassandra's face, he knows what he *should* do, and he knows what his gut is telling him, and he knows what he wants to do, and he knows what Peter and Buddy would say, and… fuck, there's really no good option.

He's always been a pretty shitty liar.

"Fine," he says, very softly. Then he makes a sweeping gesture around the room, and mouths, *Bugs?*

Cassandra seems to understand, because she says, “Jason taught me how to sweep the room. He didn’t want my father spying on us.”

“Thanks,” Juno says, and runs a hand over his hair, short-cropped at the moment. *You’ll look more respectable*, he remembers Buddy saying when she’d pulled out the clippers before they made planetfall.

More military, you mean, he’d replied.

Yes.

Turns out it had been a good decision. He still hates it.

“How did you meet him?” Cassandra asks, walking over to sit down on the couch. Juno hesitates a moment, and then goes to sit in the armchair, watching Cassandra get comfortable. She’s well into her third trimester and clearly uncomfortable, but she manages to make her slightly awkward adjustments look graceful.

“We arrived on Brahma together,” Juno admits. “Look, Cassandra—I’m trusting you here.”

“I know.” She looks him straight in the eye when she says, “If I went to my father, even with as little as you just told me, you’d be interrogated, probably under torture, and then executed. But I’m not going to do that, Juno, because you’re my friend and you’ve been good to me. I’d like to hear what you have to say.”

“Thanks,” Juno says, and runs his hand over his head again. “Peter…” and god, isn’t it weird to use Peter’s name openly, because everyone here knows it. “Peter and I have known each other for a long time. We’re… well, we’re something.”

“You’re in love with him,” Cassandra says softly, her hand coming to rest briefly on her round belly, then sliding away again.

“Yeah.” Juno has to clear his throat. “Sorry.”

“You owe me no apologies. But, wait—” she frowns. “You said you arrived together? I… you’ve only been here a few months.”

“Peter didn’t know about the Rebellion before then,” Juno says. “Or… about New Kinshasa. What the Magpie was using his name and image for. When we found out, well, he wasn’t going to let it go, and we weren’t going to let him come alone. He’d have gotten himself killed—obviously.”

Cassandra smiles wryly. “Though I can’t call myself a fan of the Rebellion, for your sake I’m glad that he seems to have escaped.”

“Me too.” Juno looks down at his lap, laces his fingers together, and then unlaces them. “This isn’t the *closest* we’ve ever cut it, but it’s definitely on the list.”

She laughs a little. “I’d like to hear what the closest was, if this wasn’t it.”

“Yeah, no, you probably… wouldn’t, actually.” Juno doesn’t like to think about it, and he’s not going to tell a story involving that much blood to a woman like Cassandra. She deserves better than to hear about that sort of thing, no matter what kind of hellscape she lives in. “Anyway. So he went that way and I went this one. To keep an eye on things. I haven’t spoken to him since we arrived on-planet.”

“This was the first time you’ve seen him?” she asks, her voice gone soft again.

“Yes.” Juno shrugs off the pity in her gaze. “It’s fine. I’ve gone longer separated from him in worse situations than this. I mean, it’s not *easy*.”

“I know,” she says, and God, she does know, doesn’t she.

“I’m sorry.” Empty words, but the best he can offer, really. Jason, her husband, had been taken before the *Carte Blanche* arrived.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Still.”

She just nods, then changes the subject. “You’ve been very calm for a person who almost saw his lover executed. And very sure he escaped in the madness.”

Juno smiles, because that’s an easy one. “Peter’s good at escaping sticky situations. It’s sort of… how we fell in love, at first. He saved my stupid ass from getting murdered by—well, it’s long story.”

“I’d love to hear it,” Cassandra says, shifting to sit up a little. She looks genuinely interested.

“Next time,” Juno offers. “For now—listen, uh. You should know… I’m not in touch very often with my people inside the Rebellion, but

Jason is alive. If I can make contact safely, I can try to get you some news about how he's doing."

Cassandra's mouth parts a little, then she closes it again so fast her teeth click, and she swallows hard. "Please," she says after a moment, her voice tight with strain. There are tears gathering in her eyes, and she reaches up impatiently to wipe them away. "Please, I would—I didn't know."

"I know." Juno sits forward and grabs one of her hands, clasping it tightly. "I'm sorry. Rita and I wanted to tell you earlier."

"Rita—of course, right. She's with you too."

"Yeah." Maybe stupid to blow her cover too, but in for a penny, as the old saying goes. "Rita and I go way back."

"Well. Well." Cassandra tightens her grip on Juno's hand, and the other presses against her belly. "Please. Anything you could tell me. Even just knowing he's alive…"

"It's going to be okay." Juno clears his throat, studying the emotion on her face. "I should go. I need to tell Rita that you know, and, correct me if I'm wrong, you could maybe use a little space to process."

"Yes," Cassandra says. "That would be good. Thank you, Juno."

When he gets up, she starts to rise as well, but he waves her back down. "Don't worry about it," he says. "Rest. Comm me if you need anything. Or I'll just come see you tomorrow."

"Please do."

Juno nods, lets go of Cassandra's hand, and swiftly lets himself out of her quarters and back into the hall, where he begins making a beeline for his own rooms, shared with Rita. He really *does* need to fill her in, and they need to prepare a message to drop to Buddy—who's going to kill him when she finds out about this. Oops.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Vespa says as she applies a disinfectant wipe to the scrape on Peter’s forehead, with absolutely no mercy or pity for his flinch away from the sting. “Just so you know.”

“I feel that that went fairly well, actually,” Peter says. “There’s really no need for this.”

“There’s every need for it.” She pulls away the wipe and peers at the scrape, then seems to decide that it doesn’t need a bandage. “Fuck off. Buddy wants to talk to you. And that shithead.”

That shithead. Peter sighs and slides off Vespa’s table once she steps back to give him space. “You shouldn’t call him that.”

“I’ll call him whatever I want. And I’m not wrong.”

“Even so.” But Peter’s given up on making peace between his fellow crewmembers and Mag.

Mag, who is alive. Who has been alive all this time, rotting in prison, then running a *rebellion*, and Peter… does not have time to end up down that particular well right now. He’s spent enough time trying to set his feelings in order, and it can wait for later, when he’s alone; for now, Buddy is waiting. Peter tugs down his shirt, pulling out the wrinkles, and banishes the thought, puts away the guilt away for later.

“Will we see you for dinner?” Peter asks Vespa, before he vanishes out the door.

“Maybe,” she says, already busily rearranging the drawers in the medical suite—he’s quite certain she does it just to annoy the Rebellion medics. She is also clearly not in the mood to talk, and he’s learned his lesson by now; he leaves.

The tunnels are bustling, people running here and there, ferrying supplies and showing new members around, carrying messages, carrying weapons. It’s almost always busy down here, never entirely quiet. Everything smells like dirt and desperation, or so Peter has come to think of the mix of sweat and blood and lazer discharge that

lingers in every hall and room of the underground complex. There's a reason he's never returned to Brahma, he thinks with a sigh, and touches the still stinging scrape on his forehead lightly. More than one reason.

Buddy and Mag are probably both in the command centre, so Peter heads there, slipping between bodies in the hall, not letting anyone so much as brush him. He feels tender, bruised from the explosion and his flight to freedom and the look in Juno's eye when he'd found his lover in the crowd.

Later, he promises himself. If all goes to plan, he'll be with Juno again in a matter of weeks, and then he can deal with all that. He files it away and steps into the command centre, where sure enough Mag is talking quietly with Abraham over a map, pointing here and there, and Buddy is leaning against a wall, watching them with her usual gimlet stare. Leaning against the opposite wall is Kasim, who's watching Buddy watch Mag and Abraham, his arms crossed across his chest and a rifle slung over his shoulder as always. Buddy notices Peter first, of course, and pushes away from the wall to stalk over in his direction; her movement draws Mag's attention so Peter gets to have an audience for it when Buddy says, "You almost blew it."

He has to close his eyes for a second. "I know," he says quietly. "I saw Juno and I froze."

She reaches out and thumps her hand down on his shoulder, hard enough to be chiding, but her grip turns gentle after a moment. "You need to get your shit together if we're going to get this done."

"I know," he repeats. She's very good at making him feel about two inches tall, he muses to himself. Truly, it's a gift.

"No need to be so hard on the man!" comes Mag's jovial tone, and he appears by Buddy's side—shorter than her but still a strong and unnerving presence. Peter hasn't readjusted just yet to what it feels like to be under those yellow eyes. Even after several months of working with the Rebellion, he still wants to flinch every time he sees Mag. "We've all lost our heads over a pretty face at one time or another—you included, Buddy! I've seen your gal. Anyway, that's not what's important. Come on over, Pete, tell us what happened. We've been trying to figure out how you managed to get captured."

"Right," Peter says, feeling a little like he's been hit with a crowbar. "Of course, Mag—well, it will amuse you, perhaps, to hear that there was a woman."

"Oh *ho*," says Mag, subtly shouldering Buddy out of the way to clasp Peter's upper arm and steer him over toward Abraham, leaving her to follow them. "Didn't think you swung that way, my young friend, but tell all."

There's no point in correcting him, though Juno'd certainly be furious if he'd been here to hear that; as it is, Kasim scowls. But Brahma's always been a bit backwards, and Peter doesn't really have the time or energy to spare for anything other than a speaking glance shared with

Buddy over his shoulder. “I’m fairly certain she wasn’t actually looking for me,” Peter explains, once Mag has released him and gone to circle around the table to stand beside Abraham. “She didn’t expect to find the ‘Angel of Brahma’,” he hates that nickname more every time he hears it, “but she said something about taking what she could get.”

“What did she look like?” Abraham asks. The engineer has as much presence as Mag, though he hides it better; he’s taller than Peter with even brown skin and white-streaked black hair with a bit of curl to it. One of the most objectively handsome men Peter has ever met, though he’s not exactly good at the ‘objective’ part these days. His attention is rather hung up elsewhere.

“Dark skin,” Peter rattles off quickly, “truly dark, even darker than Kasim, and short black hair, buzzed close to her skull. About your age, Abraham. Quite beautiful, with a round face, and striking eyes—”

“Greenish hazel?” Abraham asks sharply. “Light against her skin, with flecks of yellow?”

Peter blinks. “Yes. How did you know?”

Abraham just lets out a slow breath and hides his eyes behind his hand. Kasim, behind him, pushes away from the wall and comes over to rest a hand in the middle of his back, the closest to a public display of affection that Peter has yet witnessed between them, for all their relationship is well known.

“We were married,” Abraham says quietly, his hand slightly muffled. “Automatically annulled when I was exiled, of course. I thought she’d died when…”

“When you shot down New Kinshasa,” Buddy says bluntly. “Not a difficult assumption to make. Who is she?”

“Her name is Eshe,” Abraham says. “She’s among the Kinshasan elite, as I was once. Our marriage was arranged by her family, and was always… amicable. She loved me deeply, which rested uncomfortably between us at times; I cared for her but with less passion. When I was convicted and exiled, she tried to fight for me, but I discouraged her—there would have been no sense in her throwing her life away for me. Did she say anything?”

Peter shrugs. “Not much that made sense. She seemed… hardened. Cynical, I suppose; quite immune to my charms, much to my dismay.”

“That does sound like her,” Abraham sighs. “Not—well, I would never have described her as *hardened*, but she’s never been easily persuaded, nor put much trust in Enforcement. If there was something she wanted with the Rebellion, some target that she felt they’d failed to eliminate, I can imagine her taking things into her own hands.”

“You said it didn’t seem like she was looking for you,” Buddy interjects, crossing her arms.

“No,” Peter says. “She…” He digs through his memory, pulls up what he recalls of the night he was arrested. She’d been… “I stumbled across her more by accident than anything else. I had gone for a walk through the tunnels to clear my head, and came near the Alois Street exit. She was sneaking in, I think—dressed for stealth, certainly. We surprised each other, but she got her hands on a blaster before I could do anything, said, ‘You’re not the one I want, Angel, but I’ll take what I can get.’ Then she stunned me.”

Abraham smiles wryly. “No mercy. That does sound like her.”

Peter nods. “If I had had even a second longer to react I might have escaped, but she gave me no such opportunity.”

Mag tilts his head. “Who do you think she was after?”

“You’re the most likely target,” Buddy says. “Revenge is a powerful motivator.”

“Revenge?” Abraham says, raising an eyebrow. “For what?”

“For *you*,” Buddy says, the *idiot* clearly implied. “You just said she loved you, idiot.” Ah, there it is. “It wouldn’t have been unreasonable to believe that you died when the city fell. You’ve mentioned before that you lived in that district before getting involved with Mr. Ransom here, and no one knows your name—they only know you as Julius, the weapons engineer behind the Fall. She probably blames him,” she gestures at Mag, “for your death, him and your alter-ego, and was looking for one or both of you to assassinate you.”

“That’s a bit of a leap, don’t you think?” Mag says. He crosses his arms and raises an eyebrow, projecting his disbelief clearly.

Buddy shrugs. “It’s what I would have done.”

Given that she spent fifteen years waiting for her own lover with absolutely no reason to believe she was still alive, Peter doesn’t doubt

that. He can empathize, in fact. “So what do we do about her?” Peter says. “She is obviously a threat, if she knows the location of one of the tunnel entrances.”

“If she had told anyone, we would have constables in the tunnels by now,” Abraham says, though he’s already unrolling a large flexpad and bringing up a map to flag the entrance that Eshe discovered.

Mag waggles his hand in a so-so gesture. “Even odds, there. Might be gathering forces—we should evacuate the nearest tunnels.”

“Right,” Peter says. Abraham is already tapping out the evac order on another pad, consulting the map to decide which tunnels should be emptied. “But that does leave her as a problem.”

“I won’t see her harmed,” Abraham says, looking up from his work. His voice is quiet but steely in the way he gets sometimes. He’s not obtrusive, not like Mag, but he has as iron a spine as anyone in the Rebellion. “She is a good person, and I think she could be an ally.”

“So how do we get to her?” Buddy asks, before Mag can open his mouth. He turns a flinty look on her, but she ignores it. “We can get a message to Juno, but we don’t know if he knows her.”

“He’s probably our best bet,” Mag says. He reaches down to shuffle a few sheets of paper around on the table in front of him, and pulls up a list of personnel: known sympathizers and their very, very few spies. Most of them are in the lower levels of Enforcement; Juno is definitely the closest to Eshe, but he’s never mentioned her in his sporadic reports. That might just be because he and Rita are forced to prioritize information—it’s difficult for them to send messages out—but he might also be unaware of her.

“If she doesn’t already know him, she will take time to come to trust him,” Abraham says. “She does not open up easily. He could take a blunt approach, but that’s likely to get him arrested and possibly executed in your place, Peter. They’ll not be so careless again, either.”

Mag sighs and rubs a hand over his face. “Back to disappearances and shallow graves for a while, yes. I had thought we might finish this before any more innocents died, but things happen,” he says, and looks briefly over at Peter, just long enough for Peter to know who Mag blames for the hiccup in their plans. “We’ll need to tread carefully, or whoever tries to make contact is going to get disappeared.”

“Not Juno, then,” Peter says. “Who else do we have?”

“No one,” Mag says. He puts his finger on Juno’s name and gives Peter a sharp look. “I get that you’re feeling a little reluctant, Pete, but he’s our best bet.”

Peter closes his teeth and tries not to clench them. “Right,” he says.

Buddy, beside him, leans forward and puts a hand flat on the table. “No,” she says. “You don’t get to treat one of my people like a pawn in your grand plan, Mr. Ransom. We’ll find another way.”

“Buddy,” he starts, sounding almost amused, “he might be one of your people under normal circumstances, but right now he works for the Rebellion, and that means *I* get to decide.”

“Being in charge doesn’t make you God,” Buddy says.

“I don’t need to be a god,” Mag replies, “I just need not to be an idiot. Now come on, is your boy capable or not?”

“First of all,” she says, leaning in even further, until they’re almost nose-to-nose, “Juno Steel is no one’s *boy*, but you’re damn right that he’s *mine*, and that means you do *not* get to decide to throw his life away for a hair-brained plan.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” Mag says. “I’ve been running this Rebellion for longer than you knew it existed.”

“Oh, do not play that card again. All you know is how to throw people away like they’re worthless,” Buddy says. “You couldn’t run a functional crew if *your* life depended on it, *Ransom*, because you’re too much of a coward. That you’ve come this far is down to—”

Peter must not be the only one who can see that this argument is about to come to blow—again—because from behind him, Kasim says, “I can get in.”

Peter turns from where he’d been stuck as if hypnotized watching Buddy and Mag face off over the right to sacrifice Juno’s life and blinks at Kasim. The younger man rarely speaks up in these meetings, preferring to lurk like someone’s bodyguard.

“Kasim,” Abraham says, and steps over to touch his arm. Kasim reaches back and returns the touch, adding a reassuring look that makes Peter ache for the support he’s missing right now, and then

turns his firm dark gaze on Mag.

“I’ll get myself arrested,” Kasim says, ignoring the way Abraham’s expression goes tight, and then very, very blank. “Easy enough. I can make contact with Eshe from the inside. I know more than enough about Abraham to convince her that I’m not full of shit when I tell her he’s alive. Hopefully that’ll sway her.”

“And if it doesn’t, you’ll be *killed*,” Abraham says fiercely. “It’s dangerous.”

“Not more than sending Steel in without any information,” Kasim points out. “And at least I can agree to the danger ahead of time, make contingency plans, talk it out. *And* I’ll have him there to get me out again if it goes wrong, or after I make contact if all goes well.”

Abraham doesn’t look happy, but he subsides. “Fine,” he says shortly. “But you’re not going in alone.”

“Who else would we send along?” Kasim asks.

“Send Vespa,” Buddy says. Peter turns to her, surprised. If she was unwilling to risk Juno, why would she be willing to risk Vespa? He’s not masking his surprise very well, and she clarifies, “She’s good enough to escape on her own if she needs to, and it’ll be better to have someone who knows Carte Blanche codes and signs if you’re going to need to communicate to Juno on the sly.”

“Alright,” Kasim agrees easily. “Done. Vespa and I go in, make contact with Eshe, then get out—Vespa with Juno’s help, and hopefully me with Eshe’s, or with Vespa if necessary.”

“We could also use Jason,” Peter says, and waves a hand when everyone looks at him. “He’d be an easy in, and would certainly have the access necessary to get Vespa or Kasim or both of them out.”

“We can’t trust him,” Mag says immediately. “And if Ophion’s not an idiot, he’ll have Thalas under close observation for weeks to make sure he hasn’t switched sides—which he has. Too risky.”

More risky than a plan that would almost certainly get Juno killed? Peter doesn’t say it. He’s always known that there’s little point in arguing with Mag; if he knows anything about his old mentor, it’s that the man has his own priorities. “Just a suggestion,” he says instead, mild as milk, and ignores Buddy’s look. She *really* knows him too well. Once upon a time, Mag was the only person who came anywhere near

being able to read him, but everyone on the Carte Blanche seems able to look right through his skin. Hard to decide, some days, whether he loves it or hates it.

"So it's settled," Kasim says. "I'll go speak with Vespa, make a plan with her."

"How are you planning to get yourself arrested?" Mag asks. "I mean, not that just wandering around up there for a while wouldn't do it, but it's not exactly efficient, and time's a problem."

"Not sure yet," Kasim says with a shrug. "Pay a visit to one of the sympathizers under observation, maybe?"

"That'd work," Mag says, mildly approving. "Well, you let me know when you've spoken with Vespa and I'll get you the list."

"Sure," Kasim says, and glances over at Abraham, then at Buddy. "Maybe you two want to come along with me, while Mag makes that list?"

Abraham just nods, and Buddy says, "You'd be right about that one." She glances at Peter. "She's still in the infirmary?"

Peter nods, and a moment later the three of them are gone, Kasim leading the way. Mag is still standing at the table, beginning to shuffle through the papers on the hunt for the list of known sympathizers not yet gone underground. After a few seconds, he looks up and starts, as if he'd forgotten Peter was there; as if that were likely.

"Pete," he says. "You need something?"

"No," Peter says, because he doesn't, and says, "My apologies, Mag—I was only lost in thought."

"Not a problem," Mag says. "Why don't you go talk to Thalas, huh? His pretty little wife was in the audience with your Juno; you can tell him you saw her and she's in good hands."

That's true—Peter had only half-registered her presence, caught on Juno as he was, but he'd recognized Cassandra Thalas. "Good thought," he says, nods when Mag waves him away, and goes as well. Easier to do this than to find something to do with himself—trying to work alongside the Rebellion members is always awkward, because most of them get this strange awe around him, the so-called Angel of Brahma. Jet's been gone doing recon in the city, Vespa and Buddy will

be busy with Abraham and Kasim… And Juno is gone. He has nowhere to go at the moment, so he might as well listen to Mag and go find Jason.

Not to say that Jason is difficult to fine. The man is confined to his rooms, only allowed out under guard, and even then not permitted to wander very far. Peter has always been of the impression that such restrictions are a little unnecessary—Jason is on their side, or at least agrees with their cause, and while he's unwilling to fight for them, he's unlikely to betray them, either. But Mag is paranoid, and not for bad reason; he's been betrayed before.

Peter goes to the section of the tunnel host to the most deeply-buried living spaces. It's labyrinthine, of course, but he knows the way, and it's only a few minutes to find Jason's door and knock.

"A moment, please!" a voice calls from within, and it's only a few seconds' delay before the door swings open a crack and Jason peers out, his clear blue eyes wary until they settle on Peter, and then his expression clears and he opens the door more widely. "Peter! Come in, come in."

He ushers Peter inside, broad hand resting familiarly on Peter's shoulder, and takes a glance down the corridor before shutting the door again. "What brings you my way?" he asks, warm and genial. "Or, wait—Cassandra would flay me for forgetting my manners. Can I get you tea, or… water? I know I have that, at least."

Peter waves the offer away. "I'm fine. I wanted to come speak with you about something."

"Oh?" Jason gestures toward the table and chairs set up in the middle of the main room of his quarters—it serves as kitchen and dining room; there's a small room off to the side that makes up his bedroom, and unlike most quarters, he has a side door into a tiny bathroom. The lap of luxury, truly, Peter thinks as they come to sit down at Jason's table. That he's come so far to arrive here…

"I saw your wife today," Peter says, rather than dance around the subject. "She and my… my Juno were at the execution."

Jason physically sags with relief, and hides his face in his hands for a long few seconds. Peter looks away, giving him the space to compose himself, though Jason has never seemed very embarrassed to shout or laugh or cry in front of an audience. How such a person survived among the savage high elite of New Kinshasa, who would as soon kill

their own children as hand a social rival a weakness, Peter doesn't entirely understand.

"Thank you," Jason says finally, and Peter looks over to see that he's scrubbing some wetness from his eyes, though not off his cheeks. "Gods, I cannot possibly describe to you how much it means to hear that. She… did you see if she's been delivered? It's early, but…"

"I only caught a glimpse," Peter says apologetically, "and from a bad angle. But she seemed to still be pregnant, and if she was with Juno, your child is safe."

Jason nods. "I… thank you. Yes, I believe that. I can't imagine someone like you would have anyone unable to take care of themself for a lover."

"Someone like me?" Peter asks, raising an eyebrow.

"You're…" Jason waves a hand vaguely, sits back in his chair to give Peter a measuring look not unlike Buddy's. Oh dear. "You're guarded. Self-protective—nothing wrong with it! Just, I can't see you expanding that walled border to include anyone who didn't have protections of his own. As it is, if he's as capable as you imply and as protective, you're safer in your vulnerability with him than you would be if you were entirely alone."

It's an incisive statement for someone who's never met Juno, though of course it leaves a great deal out: everything *behind* Peter's walls. But then, Jason certainly would know by now how careful Peter has needed to be, and he's from Brahma too. He knows. "I suppose you're right," Peter says. He thinks of what he knows of Jason in return, the little things he's observed and the comments he's made about his deeply beloved wife. "I haven't met your Cassandra, but I imagine she's somewhat more fragile, though with as strong a sense of right and wrong as my own lady love, to keep up with you."

Jason nods wryly. "That's about right. Cassandra… well, her father is a hard man, as you know."

"I do." Ophion, the Head of Enforcement. He had survived the fall of New Kinshasa because he'd already been posted on the surface, sent away because his conviction and his dedication to "justice" was too hardline even for those on high, not least his late predecessor. The Rebellion had made his methods seem tolerable to the remaining New Kinshasan elite. "He treated her poorly?"

“Yes,” Jason sighs. “I won’t say it broke something in her—or if it did, it forged something equal or greater. But she can be, as you said, fragile.” He looks up, meets Peter’s eyes. “I’d kill to protect her. In an *instant*, Peter, without any regret.”

Peter smiles back, sharp. “I do know the feeling.”

“Well,” Jason says, sitting back. “Hopefully we’ll both be reunited soon, yes?”

“Indeed.” Which is really all that needs to be said. They sit quietly for a moment, and then Peter says, “Chess?”

“It would be my genuine delight,” Jason says, and Peter doesn’t doubt him, nor does he disagree. Anything would be a delight when placed against the possibility of passing yet another afternoon alone.

Chapter End Notes

> Art by the lovely taylor-draws-stuff! A link to their art post on Tumblr (which includes the second piece of art they did for this fic) is in the end notes for the work.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Heavier warning than usual for this chapter: there's fairly explicit description of potential (though no actual) torture, and someone is threatened with rape.
>
> And on a lighter note, Taylor's second piece of art!

“Mistah Steel!”

Juno pokes his head out of his room. “Yeah, Rita?”

She’s doing a little squirmy thing in in her chair that tells him that a message from Buddy has arrived. “A message came!” she says a second later, sure enough.

“Right.” Juno runs a hand over his hair and comes out into the room. “What’s it say?”

“Well, first Buddy called you a bunch of bad words,” Rita says, grinning a little.

Juno rolls his eye. “Of course she did. I assume she had something *other* than that to say?”

“Yeah, boss, I’m gettin’ there! Gimme a second! Anyway, after all of the bad words—and I haven’t even heard some of those before, it’s real impressive, I’ll send you the text later; anyway, after all of that, she said that Vespa’s going to get arrested!”

“Wow,” Juno says, bland. “Really buried the lede there, huh?”

“Well I didn’t mean to, boss, except Buddy sort of did it too! Like I said, all the swearing.” Rita makes an effusive gesture with the hand currently holding a bag of crisps, sending several of them flying. “But now you know! Anyway, probably it’ll be some time this afternoon if I decrypted the timestamp correctly so you should probably go loiter down in the detention centre and do some paperwork or whatever it is you consultant types do when you’re not, well, doing awful stuff to people who really don’t deserve it.” She takes a very deep breath. “Also Kasim, who I don’t think we know, he’s getting arrested too so that he can talk to Eshe—isn’t she the lady who arrested Mr. Peter?”

“Yeah,” Juno says, frowning. “They must be trying to get a message in, or do some recon. Did she say anything about me helping them escape again?”

“Yeah, boss, exactly that! Vespa’s got most of a plan and I’ll help her with the rest, don’t you worry, we’ll make sure you’re exactly where you need to be and all that good stuff.” Rita gives him a thumbs up. “So, like I said, you better get down there. I’ll stay here and I’ll start writing code for the next message to tell them that you’ve got in all under control! And I’ll get the most recent set of codes for the cells.”

“Sounds good.” Juno comes over and claps Rita on on the shoulder. “Don’t know what I’d do without you, Rita. Keep up the good work.”

She beams, and he vanishes back into his room to change—he’d been planning to visit the gym, try to keep in shape a little, but if he’s going to go pretend to do consulting work while he waits for Vespa and Kasim to appear he wants his coat and a pair of cargo pants. If he’s learned anything after years in the detective business, it’s that you never know when you’re going to need to punch someone in the face and run.

Changed, he bids a quick goodbye to Rita and heads for the detention centre’s offices. They’re sprawling; the detention centre is most of this compound. The core of it, in fact: all the rest, the pre-fab housing and the other offices and the control centres, were all added after the fall, as Enforcement was scrambling to rehouse itself and regain control over the surface. Of course, the halls of the detention centre are no less dour, grey, and plain than the rest of the building, they’re just dour, grey, plain, and slightly worn with age.

The main office is fairly quiet when he arrives, a few constables working on paperwork or monitoring screens with surveillance feeds, though most of the latter happens elsewhere. To Juno’s relief, though not particularly his surprise, Alexei Lee, the Chief Constable for the Third Quarter, is in his office when Juno sticks his head in.

“Sure, sure,” Alexei says, when Juno tells him that he’s come to do a little bit of background reading on a local suspect. “Holler if you sniff out anything that you want ground leave or some manpower for.”

Juno just nods and slips away to the desk he’d been assigned. Technically he shares it with an actual proper constable, but he’s never seen the guy who might be his partner—he pulls a lot of guard shifts elsewhere in the compound and never comes into the office. He

flops down at his desk, ignores the dirty look from the constable at the desk next to his, and sets about in an industrial manner doing absolutely nothing. He doesn't actually have any suspected Rebels right now, and if he did he'd report them to Buddy first and Alexei second, for all that the Chief is… well, as honourable as any Enforcement officer gets. Instead, he flips through some surveillance tape he'd requested earlier in the week and picks someone out at random, then goes about reading their life story. It's all documented, right down to every visit they've ever made to a public bathroom; there are cameras everywhere. Brahma almost makes Juno miss Mars.

He manages to read a few files that way, searching for interesting details to send Enforcement on wild goose chases after, before an alert pops up on the screen in front of him: *Apprehended suspects (3) incoming to detention, flight risk: high. All constables on alert*. Juno raises an eyebrow at it, stretches, and gets up from his desk as if bored and looking for something new to do. Alexei is leaving his own office and doesn't blink when Juno falls in beside him.

"Armed?" Alexei asks, as they make their way toward the intake room.

Juno shakes his head. "Just a consultant, remember?"

"Right." Alexei shakes his head, and then unholsters his own sidearm —a good quality blaster, currently set to stun. "Take this. I've seen your range assessment, you're a better shot than me. I'm gonna be holding a fuckin' info pad anyway."

"Sure." Juno checks the weapon quickly out of habit, but it's well-maintained, and he slots it into the empty holster he wears. He's been issued a weapon in the past when he's got ground leave to do his own legwork. "Thanks."

Alexei shrugs. "Just shoot 'em if they run."

"Right." More like, *yeah, right*. Then again, Juno knows his own gun is set to stun; he has no such assurance about any of the other blasters that might end up aimed at Vespa.

It's a short walk from the office to the intake room, and when they get there it's already full of constables, several of them with weapons out. Alexei retrieves a pad from a slot on the wall and swipes through a few pages of information about the incoming suspects, then grunts and says, "Be ready, gents, but keep calm. One of these is a suspected Rebellion ringleader, and if you shoot him before we get him to

Interrogation his Headship is not going to be pleased."

There's a chorus of ayes from the assembled constables, and when the door opens to the sound of shouting, no one raises their weapon, though a few go tense.

"—bastards don't have any fucking right at all to do this to me! Let me go right now, I haven't done a damn thing, and you all know it! You can't—ouch, ow, hey, you fucker, stop—!" The voice, female, unfamiliar, cuts off after another cry, and a moment later a constable with a furious look on his face hauls a small woman with brown skin and a long, messy braid of black hair into the room. She looks dazed, and there's a mark on her temple that suggests to Juno that she's just been struck hard, probably with the butt of another constable's rifle, if he knows them at all.

The next person into the room is Vespa, two constables standing at her shoulder, one with his gun pressed to her back. She's got her hands bound with electro-cuffs in front of her, and the second constable guarding her is carrying the remote openly, ready to give her a shock if she tries to run. She sweeps the room and meet's Juno's eye, then cuts her gaze toward the dazed woman. Very subtly, she makes the Carte Blanche hand signal for *bystander*, and Juno blinks twice, rapidly, to confirm before she's led to stand facing the wall, where the other woman has been forced to kneel, unable to stand by herself at the moment.

The third suspect must be Kasim, then, and he comes in guarded the same way Vespa was. Dark brown skin and messy hair, sharp features madesharper by the glare that he throws around the room. His dark eyes don't settle on Juno at all, though he spares a particularly heated look for Alexei.

Once all three are against the wall, multiple rifles aimed at their backs, Alexei glances down at the pad again, makes a notation, and says, "Off to search and decontam. Then to Interrogation."

Another chorus of ayes, and Juno takes the opportunity. As the strange woman is dragged back to her feet and led away, Juno gestures to her and says, "Can I take her?"

Alexei raises an eyebrow. "Didn't think you were one for interrogation work."

Juno shrugs. "Not usually. But I was trained as a cop back in Hyperion, I know how to get info, and I got pretty used to hostile

suspects back home. Plus I'm not from around here, so she might be less combative with me than she would be with another Enforcement officer."

Alexei weighs that, and Juno gives him a moment. Better not to push too hard, or the man'll get suspicious. Awful though Enforcement's methods are, they're not *all* brutes. "Alright," he says, finally. "They'll put her in I-6. Show us how they get it done in Hyperion City then, Red."

The nickname, a common and somewhat derogatory one for Mars-born folk out in the outer rim, makes Juno roll his eye, but he's not going to start an argument about it right now. Instead, he heads for Interrogation, and then down the hall to room 6. Outside there's a metal locker filled with all sorts of things, and for appearances he opens it and takes a look. Most of what's in there is the sort of thing he'd expected, the tools of blunt-force torture: blades of various kinds, pliers, knuckle-wraps for bare-fist beatings, an electric prod, a crop. Various kinds of restraints, too, and a key for the shock cuffs that all suspects come in bound with. Nothing meant to mutilate, though there would be ways to do it with what's here. A sheet on the inside of the locker door informs Juno that drugs, to be injected or laced into water or food, can be requested from the window down the hall. On the wall next to the locker is a control panel for changing the temperature in the room, and there's a set of tubs of various sizes and a spigot for water. He'd been shown all this when he'd first arrived, given the grand tour, but he'd declined pretty firmly to take on any interrogation duties, which had been accepted with a shrug.

He's not going to use any of these things on the innocent that had been caught with Vespa and Kasim, but just looking at them makes him sick. Quickly, he grabs a skein of rope, the softest they have, and slips into the room. There's a single chair set up already, but he pulls open a panel on the wall—camouflaged until he presses a preset sequence into the wall—and retrieves a folding table with an inset bar in the middle for cuffing or tying someone to, and another chair. With that done, he snags the pad from the wall with the woman's information already uploaded into it and heads to a nearby waiting room—meant for constables who want to let their suspects stew for a bit—to do his homework before she arrives.

Miri Marshall, 24 years old, vehicle mechanic. She's unmarried with no listed family (mother deceased; father unlisted); she cohabits with her best friend and possible lover, one Shay Weaver; and she owns her business. She turns a tidy profit, too. Her reputation is good, and she

has a reasonable list of regular customers. Including, unfortunately for her, several suspected Rebellion sympathizers. He stops reading there, because he wants to hear her version of the arrest first, though he's already got his suspicions. Then he checks the pad, sees that she's been delivered to I-6, and heads that way.

When he arrives, he can see through the one-way glass window in the door that the constable who'd brought her in, the angry one, is still there. She's already seated in the chair, and Juno can see the look on her face: bleak and bitter, but not broken. A press of a button on the control panel gives him the audio in the room.

"—going to do to you, you bitch. He's an out-of-towner, he's probably got all *kinds* of fun ideas, the sort of stuff you've never even thought of. I know you dirt-sucking surface-dwellers tell stories about Interrogation like that'll ever prepare you for what you get when you finally put a toe out of line, but no one's seen what this guy can do."

"It doesn't matter," Ms. Marshall says, stubborn. "I didn't do anything wrong. I'll be out of here soon."

The constable laughs, cruel. "You're going to *die* here. I hope I get a crack at you too, before you do." He taps the table with his knuckles, next to where the skein of rope is lying. "Red out there's got a few ideas about what you're good for already, looks like. Maybe he'll let me watch."

That's *more* than enough of that. Juno slaps the door-open button, knowing that his fury must be showing on his face but unable to hide it, and when the constable glances over his shoulder Juno snaps, "Out."

The constable laughs. "Listening, huh? Alright, alright, I'll let you have some privacy. Not like I don't get why you want it." Juno can't see the look on his face when he throws one more glance at Ms. Marshall, but he can imagine the leer vividly. It only stokes his anger.

"*Now*."

The constable just turns and puts up his hands in a *don't shoot* gesture, and Juno makes a mental note of the fucker's name—*Riker*—before the man brushes past him and is gone. As soon as the door closes, Juno moves to the interior control panel to lock it and set the glass to opaque; the mirror surface turns black.

When he turns back to Ms. Marshall, she looks terrified. Just for a

second, then she forces it back behind a mask of anger, but Juno sees it, and he takes a deep breath to calm himself. Then he goes to sit down at the table across from her and laces his hands together on the surface. “For the record,” he says, “I don’t get off on fear or pain.” He thinks about that, then revises, “Well, other people’s pain.”

“I don’t really care about your kinks,” she says flatly. “Are you going to ask me questions, or not?”

“You’ve got a serious spine,” Juno replies, impressed. “I am, in just a second. I figured you might like the reassurance that I’m not going to rape you, first.”

Ms. Marshall shrugs. “If you don’t, someone else might. I know they do, if they think it’ll make you talk. But thanks, I guess.”

“In my experience,” Juno says quietly, “rape makes people *less* likely to talk, not more. And I’ve got plenty of experience.”

Ms. Marshal sits back in her chair as much as she can. It doesn’t look comfortable; her hands are still bound with the shock cuffs. “Where *are* you from?”

Juno smiles a little, wry. “Mars. Hyperion City, specifically.”

“Oh.” She tilts her head. “Yeah, I’ve heard some things.”

“Not a surprise. For an inner-system planet, it’s a real shithole.” Juno unlaces his hands, taps the pad he’d brought in. “So, I have your life’s story at my fingertips, obviously. That’s how they do things here. I could look up your arrest record, too, but I’d like to hear it from you first.”

“Why?” Her hands are clenched into fists.

“I think I’ll find it enlightening. So: enlighten me.” Juno sits back as well, matching her posture, though he leaves his own hands flat on the table, relaxed.

She looks suspicious, but she says, “I was having a normal day. Doing some time in the front office at my garage. Then these two come in, a guy and a girl—she had green hair. I’ve never seen them before, but I’m not going to turn down new customers, especially ones with big jobs on offer, so when he offers me a contract to do some repair work on a half-dozen speeders I’m happy to negotiate. The second I start pulling out paperwork, twenty fucking constables smash in through the door—and don’t think I’m not suing Enforcement for the cost of repairs and the loss of productivity, my business isn’t *that* big—and arrest all three of us. Something, blah blah, Rebellion scum, on your knees, blah. Same bullshit as always.”

Juno nods. That’s about what he’d expected. Enforcement has been watching Ms. Marshall for a while because of the suspects on her client list, so Vespa and Kasim’s visit to her had been a purposeful ploy to get themselves arrested, knowing that they’d be identified. They probably hadn’t expected that she’d be taken too. “Right,” he says, and opens the pad to find Enforcement’s version of the story. The details match, more-or-less. “Do you know why you were arrested?”

“Because this compound is full of paranoid assholes?” Ms. Marshall asks rhetorically, then shrugs. “I assume just because I was there.”

Juno swipes through his pad to the headshot of the first Rebellion suspect on her client list. “Do you know this person?” he asks, showing her.

“Sure,” she says. “Eron King, we—wait. Are you telling me *Eron* of all people is with the *Rebellion*?”

Juno shrugs. “They’re a suspect.” He swipes to the next, and then the next. Ms. Marshall identifies all of them, looking more and more nervous. “You see why they nabbed you now?”

Ms. Marshall lets her head drop. “Yeah,” she whispers. “How long have they been watching me?”

“Well,” Juno says, “all your life, technically. But with special interest, for a few months.”

“I didn’t know.” She looks back up. “You need to believe me. I had *no idea*. My clients, they’re just… people.”

“Do you have any personal sympathies with the Rebellion, Ms. Marshall?” This whole interview is being recorded, so he has to ask. He suspects the answer is yes, but if she has any sense, she’ll lie.

“No, of course not,” she says, and fortunately it sounds convincing. “I had friends in the ground zero district. I have friends who’ve been injured in the crossfire in their stupid fucking war. Half the repairs I do are on vehicles that’ve been destroyed in bomb attacks and skirmishes like it doesn’t *matter* to the Rebellion that those are the only way some people can get to work, and they have to get to work so that they can *eat*. I’d never join their cause, and if I’d known that contract was Rebellion work I’d have told them to fuck off, no matter *how* much money it was. Nothing’s worth this.” She gestures as expansively as she can with her hands still tied at the room they’re sitting in. “I just want to go home.”

Juno nods. He can relate, though nowadays home isn’t so much the grungy building that had housed his apartment in Hyperion or his old office as much as it’s a group of people, and one person in particular. “Thank you, Ms. Marshall. Do you want to get out of those cuffs?”

She blinks at him. “I mean, obviously. But I figured there was no chance of that until I was out of here.”

“If you’d prefer, I can bind your hands,” Juno taps the rope, “and then tie them to the table. That’s secure enough for me; I don’t think you’re going to pull a runner.”

Ms. Marshall hesitates for a moment, clearly attempting to study Juno’s face, and whatever she sees causes her to finally shrug and hold

up her cuffed hands. “Have at it,” she says.

“Great.” Juno gets up from the table and unwinds the rope, checks it over quickly for fraying or rough spots, and then ties a simple bind around her wrists above the cuffs. Then he pulls out the cuff key, unlocks the shock cuffs, and finishes binding her wrists, her hands held securely together so that she can’t use her fingers to untie herself. He’s learned a thing or two from Peter. The trailing end gets knotted to the table, and he rises, gathering the pad with her file, and steps out.

Unsurprisingly, Alexei is standing at the window—it’s blanked out, but he’s got his ear near the intercom, listening.

“I think she was a bystander,” Juno says once the door is securely shut, tucking the pad back into its slot. “I get that you guys like to be careful, but frankly, keeping her in custody would be an idiot mistake.”

Alexei frowns at him, crossing his arms across his chest. It makes the insignia on his shoulder shift and catch the light, and Juno resists rolling his eye at the posturing. “How so?”

“She’s a pillar of her community,” Juno says. “Controversial to *you*, and maybe you don’t approve of every person in that community—fine. But abusing someone respected is only going to buy Enforcement more ill-will, and that’s not something we can afford.” He consciously uses the plural; can’t have Alexei forgetting that Juno is *one of them* right now. “And she’s innocent. I’d bet my life on it.”

To prove it, he reaches over and taps the screen control so that they can see Ms. Marshall inside. He’d tied her wrists so that she can’t get her hands untied easily, sure, but she’s got easy access to the knot holding her to the table. She could have freed herself, but she’s barely moved: she’s sitting slumped over, her head resting on her forearms where they’re stretched across the tabletop.

“That’s not the posture of a person planning to escape,” Juno says softly. “Before you say it: *yes*, she could be pretending, but I was watching her reactions pretty carefully in there. She’s honest—and she’s scared.”

Alexei nods slowly, letting his arms fall back to his sides as he watches Ms. Marshall through the window. He’s got kids, Juno remembers—probably about her age. And she’s visibly suffering, even before any of Enforcement’s usual cruel treatment.

“Alright,” he says, after a second. “When I make my report tonight, I’ll advise that she be released. Can’t make any promises, though.”

“Of course not,” Juno says, as solicitous as he can. Alexei is a decent guy, but he wouldn’t say the same of any of the higher ups in Enforcement. Ms. Marshall isn’t getting out. Good thing Juno’s got options.

Chapter 4

"Pete!"

Peter clears his expression and turns to face Mag. "Mag. What can I do for you?"

Mag laughs genially and steps up to slap Peter's shoulder. "Can't I just want to say hello to my boy?"

"Of course you can," Peter says, stretching another smile, a different one, across his face. "And yet something makes me believe that that isn't all."

"Well, no," Mag admits. "Come for a little walk with me? I've got a proposal for you."

Peter nods easily, and they stroll together down through the tunnels toward the more secure meeting rooms. Mag is watchful as they walk, as he always is, his calculating gaze sweeping over the rebels they pass, most of whom give a respectful nod when they see him. He doesn't return them, only keeps walking, moving on to the next person and minding that they're all occupied. Peter avoids the eyes of the people in the tunnels, as has become his habit, and so doesn't have to endure his own set of awed looks and polite nods. He hasn't earned them.

Eventually, they reach one of the deeper rooms, and Mag shuts the door and locks it behind them. He turns to face Peter once the lock has clicked and crosses his arms.

Peter tries not to tense visibly. He hasn't been alone in a room with Mag since they arrived, but now is not the time to think about that. He carefully files away his feelings about it, about *Mag*, as he has had to do any number of times since their arrival on Brahma and the… fraught reunion that had taken place. Later he'll seek out Buddy, perhaps, and see if she has time to talk, or he'll compose another message that he can't send to Juno and attempt to exorcise some of these demons. Later.

For now, he goes to lean back against the table, crossing his legs at the ankle in as relaxed a posture as he can manage. "What is going on, Mag?"

“I’ve been thinking, Pete,” Mag says. He begins to pace, gesturing as he walks to illustrate his words. “This war, this fight, it’s been dragging on. We’ve got people on our side, good people, but we’ve lost as many as we’ve gained and progress has been slow. But with you here, now, and your little friends, I think we can shift the balance. You see—”

“Mag—”

“—the main roadblock is Ophion,” Mag continues, as if Peter hadn’t interrupted. “He’s a figurehead, sure. They trust him, they believe in him... but he’s more than that, too. He’s a capable guy, he knows what’s what, and he’s never gonna give up, not for a minute. If I didn’t hate him so much, I’d almost respect him. But he’s never ever going to let this planet be free, so he needs to be removed from the picture.”

Peter can see where this is going. “Mag—”

“Just hear me out, Pete! Like I said, you and the others, you’re capable. You’ve got your in at the compound, but your little love could slip up any time and then we’d be hooped. So we need to act now. Get this job done. And you’re the man to do it.” Mag turns then, fixes Peter with those piercing yellow eyes. “I know you’re up to the job, aren’t you? I trained you well—you know how to get in and out of a place like a ghost, unless you forgot sometime in the past few years. And you’ve never shied away from getting a little blood on your hands if it means doing what you think is right.”

Mag is smiling. Blase and blunt, he’d said it without flinching, without any hint that he was *hinting*. Peter forces himself not to look away. “I’m not an assassin,” he says. But Mag’s right: he could do it. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“Don’t think too long,” Mag says. “This planet’s been dying by inches since before you decided to cut and run, and it’s only gotten worse since then. You can fix what didn’t get fixed back then, Pete, but only if you act now.” Then he waves a hand dismissively. “I get that you probably need some time to come to terms with it all. Come see me when you’re ready to make a plan. I can help you. I know the wily old fucker pretty well at this point.”

Because you’re two sides of the same coin, Peter thinks. Mag had said it himself: *he’s never gonna give up, not for a minute*. The same could be said of both of them; neither will ever give up on their *own* vision of what’s right for Brahma. “Fine,” he says, instead of voicing his

thoughts. “I’ll need at least a day or two. I’d like to see Kasim and Vespa back safely first, in case I’m needed to help extract them.”

“Sure, sure,” Mag says, with another of those hand waves. “But then we’ll finish this, right Pete? Together—like it should be.”

“Together,” Peter agrees, a little faint.

Mag smiles and steps forward to slap Peter’s shoulder, and then he’s gone, out the door and off to make himself busy elsewhere. There’s always something to do, though the running of the Rebellion often feels like a game of hurry-up-and-wait, much like a good heist. Still, there are people to be fed and wounds to be bandaged, speeches to be made, shoulders to be rubbed or cried upon. More and more people have to take shelter in the tunnels every day as Enforcement cracks down above, desperate to stop the advance of the Rebellion, and they need to be processed. The hackers that the Rebellion has attracted are constantly working on erasing Enforcement records in hopes that some of them might be able to return to their lives sooner rather than later. Usually it’s impossible, but they all live in hope.

Peter sits down on the table he’s leaning against and curls in on himself, burying his face in his hands for a long second. Weakness, but he’s not wearing any makeup right now to give him away—no time for that sort of thing down here. So he can scrub at his eyes and press his fingertips into his cheeks and try to decide. He’s bought himself some time, but he should choose now so that he’ll have a few days to strategize. If he says no, he’ll need to find a way to argue Mag around. If he says yes, he’ll need… time. He’ll need time.

It’s not that Peter doesn’t kill people. He does, sometimes. But always when *necessary*, when the killing comes with some purpose beyond killing. This does have that purpose. Mag was right, too: this is necessary, and no worse than any other murder Peter has committed. He’s killed men more innocent than Ophion; he’s killed in colder blood; he’s killed to protect lesser aims. So why does this, the thought of sinking a knife between the ribs of *this* man, make him feel so sick?

A soft tap at the door. Peter looks up, and there’s Buddy, prescient as always.

“How do you always know?” he asks, soft.

She tilts her head, soft locks of curling red falling across her face; impatient, she brushes them away, briefly baring the edges of her scars. “I saw him dragging you off,” she says. “Mag gets under your

skin."

The problem is that Peter had once gotten under *Mag's* skin, but Buddy doesn't know about that—or at least, Peter's never told her. "I suppose that's true," he says instead, because at least that's the truth too.

"What did he say?"

"Mag wants me to kill Ophion." The crux of the matter becomes clear as Peter gives it voice: *Mag wants*.

"I see." Buddy's tone is neutral. "And what do you think of that?"

Peter swallows. "I… I could."

"Of course you *could*," she says. "I didn't hire you just because you're pretty. I asked what you *think*."

"I don't know what I think," Peter says, after a dry laugh and then a long pause. "I don't know what *to* think. I don't suppose you would like to tell me?"

She gives him the look that that deserves, of course. Peter is quite sure that Buddy has never in her life pulled a punch.

"Right," he sighs.

"I think you know what you think, you just don't want to say it," Buddy says.

"I suppose." Peter rubs a hand over his face and studies the grey wall to his left for a moment. "I don't want to do it."

"Then you won't have to," Buddy says without hesitation. "I can imagine the arguments he made, but there will be another way. One that doesn't involve putting your particular neck—or the necks of anyone in my crew—on the line for his crusade."

"It isn't—"

"It *is*, actually," Buddy says. "Just or not."

It is, she's right. "Stop being right about everything," Peter says, purposefully petulant, channeling Rita. "It's annoying."

"Don't pull that crap on me," Buddy says in reply. "Come on. We're

going to go talk to Jet."

"Jet's back?" Peter asks, his attention caught.

"He is." Buddy waves Peter after her as she leaves the room, and he follows with much less reluctance than he'd followed Mag into it earlier. They make their way back up through the tunnels toward the area where their claimed living quarters are, to the room that was assigned to Jet and Peter—not that Jet has been there much since they arrived on planet. He'd made himself scarce quickly, so Peter has for the most part had the space to himself. It was nice while it lasted, though he won't mind sharing, either; it will be pleasant to have something to break the silence in the evenings. It's amazing how quickly a person becomes accustomed to having another person nearby when they sleep.

Sure enough, the door to the room is ajar, and Buddy pushes it open without knocking to reveal Jet inside, meticulously unpacking his bag and putting away his belongings in the small footlocker that came with each of the beds in the room. He looks up when he hears the door slide across the ground, and nods to Buddy and Peter.

"You found him," he says to Buddy. "Was it as you suspected?"

"Of course it was, darling," she says, and comes in to rest her hand briefly on Jet's shoulder before he returns to his unpacking; she then goes over to seat herself, sitting tall, on Peter's bed. "Perhaps you'd like to weigh in on the conversation Peter and I were just having."

"Oh?" Jet pulls a shirt from the depths of his bag and refolds it before looking over at Peter.

"Mag asked me to play the assassin," Peter admits, and then closes the door behind himself before he commits any more errors of indiscretion.

"He wants you to kill Ophion," Jet says. "I see."

Peter nods. "Is it so obviously the next step?"

There's a pause while Jet seems to consider, and then he says, "By the logic of a certain kind of mind, yes. Mag's commitment to his cause will always come first, and I understand that he has never shied away from atrocities in the name of that commitment in the past."

"No." Peter's mouth twists. "Then again, I can't precisely throw

stones."

Both Buddy and Jet turn to look at Peter, their gazes heavy. "Care to share, Peter?" Buddy asks, in a tone that suggests that it's not a request.

It was surely going to come to this eventually—they've heard people call Peter 'Angel' and must have done some digging into Peter's past and his involvement with political matters here on Brahma—but nonetheless Peter is reluctant to tell them. Juno knows—isn't that enough? But Juno isn't here right now, and Buddy and Jet deserve to know why he's struggling so much with this. Why he *owes* Mag. "I… you noticed, surely, that I was surprised to find that Mag was still alive when we arrived on Brahma."

"Yes," Buddy says. "I assumed that it was a situation similar to mine and Vespa's—that you had seen him arrested during some heist or, more likely, an early effort toward rebellion, and thought him dead. I take it that was not the case?"

"No," Peter says. "A fair assumption, but no. Mag and I, before I left Brahma the first time, we did a last job together. We infiltrated New Kinshasa, right to the heart of the Guardian Angel System. Mag had… gotten access to a schematic." No need to air all the drama involving his father. His maybe-father.

"Mag planned to disable it from within?" Jet asks. "Things did not go to plan."

Peter shakes his head, and then runs a hand over his hair, letting the tell show. It's not like doing so will make him any *more* vulnerable in this situation; this is about as bad as it gets. "The plan was the depower the Guardian Angel System by removing a reactor core. I knew that. What I did *not* know, because he did not tell me, was that to depower the Guardian Angel System was also to depower the engines which held New Kinshasa aloft. Taking the core would have caused the fall of the city, quite literally—you both have seen Ground Zero, so you are aware of the level of devastation that would cause. Mag wanted me to have a hand in that without even the courtesy of an advance warning that that was what we were there to do. I… objected. Strenuously. With a knife."

"Ah," Buddy says, sounding enlightened. "And you fled the planet, I assume?"

"Yes. I believed Mag was dead; there was nothing left here for me."

Some unknowable expression on Buddy's face, a strange mix of compassion and rage and other things that Peter only half-recognizes. "How old were you?"

Not the question Peter had been expecting, if he were to be honest. He takes a moment to decide whether or not he's going to lie, realizes that Buddy is definitely going to know if he tries, and says, "Sixteen."

"Young," Jet murmurs, and Buddy nods.

"I was," Peter says, "but I think I've grown up at least a little since then."

"You have," Buddy says. "Growing up doesn't mean forgetting our pasts, though."

"Nor does what you did in the past have to be what you do in the future," Jet adds. "I have killed a lot of people, but that does not make it any easier."

"No," Peter says quietly, looking away from them both. "I suppose it doesn't." It *does*, actually—after killing the man who might as well have been his father, killing a stranger is nothing. Should be nothing. *Is nothing*, he tells himself firmly. He's killed plenty of people.

"You were willing to kill Mag to prevent rather a lot of other deaths," Buddy says. She steps forward—doesn't reach out, but the firm click of her heel on the floor is enough of a demand for attention that Peter looks up, meets her eye. "And yes, perhaps it means that both you and he were willing to sacrifice the few—or the one—in the name of saving the many. But I suspect you would have done otherwise if he had given you *any* choice; for him, this is simply the *fastest* way to what he wants, not the *only* way."

Peter sighs, then takes a more deliberate deep breath. She's probably right—it's not like he hasn't struggled at times with the things he has in common with his old mentor, but when it comes down to the wire, Mag is the kind of man willing to issue an ultimatum, and Peter isn't.

"Alright," he says, having let the silence stretch rather long enough. "I… I'm not going to do it."

Buddy smiles. "Let's go speak to him, then. If we're going to make alternative plans, we'd best get started sooner rather than later—don't want to let his window of assassination opportunity slip by, after all, even if you're not going to be doing any assassinating."

Behind her, Jet nods. “I will happily detain Mag if necessary while we detail and carry out our own plan. He is very unsavoury.”

“That is one way to put it,” Peter says, mild as milk, and then leaves the room with Buddy, hoping things would go rather better than they had the last time he attempted to tell Mag that a leap straight to murder and mayhem was perhaps unnecessary.

Chapter 5

Juno wakes up in medical with a splitting headache to find that the entire base is in an uproar, which means that the plan to spring Vespa and Ms. Marshall has gone off without a hitch. Probably. To be totally honest, his memory's a bit fuzzy, but that's only all the more reason to get back to his rooms and figure out what's going on ASAP. He bullies his way past the medic as soon as everything stops spinning and goes back to his room with instructions for Rita to keep an eye on the *lovely* concussion that Vespa gave him and an antiemetic just in case, and then flops onto the terrible couch that they gave him and takes a nap, even though he's probably not supposed to sleep with he's got a head injury, or something. Whatever, any medical advice not given by Vespa herself he's gonna go ahead and label as "bullshit," and she usually tells the Carte Blanche crew to either walk or sleep it off once she's done bandaging or splinting anything immediately broken or bleeding, so. He's probably fine.

Hopefully she's fine too—he wakes up to find that Rita's not back, so he can't actually be sure. It's probably all hands on deck down in monitoring, trying to figure out how Vespa got out and where she'd gone; good luck, is all he has to say to them. Rita's involvement means they're never gonna find her, and even if she'd been on her own, she'd probably have managed. Vespa's slippery as fuck, even injured. Which she *definitely* had been. His gambit to protect Ms. Marshall had been successful, but that had left Vespa in the hands of several more *enthusiastic* constables, who'd apparently taken great pleasure in trying to beat the shit out of an older woman half their size. Not that she can't take it; Juno knows she can. But he still feels bad for leaving her to be slapped around, treated to mild electroshock, and then left in a room that was alternately freezing cold and uncomfortably hot. Well. Bad is probably an understatement.

The guilt and anxiety reproducing themselves like particularly unpleasant rabbits in the pit of his stomach must show on his face when Rita comes through the door to find him pacing, because she immediately says, "Aw, Mistah Steel."

"Is everything alright?" he asks, instead of addressing that.

"Oh yeah," Rita says, coming over to pat his arm in a conciliatory manner. "Everything's just fine. Miss Marshall didn't look too pleased at all on the feeds but Vespa got her moving and all, and they snagged

a hoverbike and zipped right off—not sure I've ever seen someone hotwire a hoverbike as quick as Miss Marshall did, y'know that? She's real impressive! Even so mad about getting pretty much kidnapped she managed to get that thing going like this!" Rita snaps her fingers to demonstrate.

Juno lets out a breath. "Great. What about Kasim?"

"Er, well, that didn't go so well," Rita says, drooping a little. "Vespa didn't manage to meet up with him, the alarms got tripped too early and she had to go or she and Miss Marshall probably would've been in real hot water, y'know? So he's still here. But we're still here too, so we can figure out a new plan, right?"

Easier said than done, but Juno nods. "Right. You said he'd managed to speak with Eshe?"

"I think so," she says. "She jammed all the cameras—she's real impressive too. Like a spy! Or a *ninja*, from one of the old Terran streams! D'you think she's secretly a ninja, Mistah Steel? Oooh, that'd be so cool!" Rita distracts herself rambling about a stream involving ninjas, which Juno listens to with half an ear—he's not entirely sure he knows what a ninja is, but he catches something about *sneaky* and *competent* so he assumes she's probably right that Eshe is sort of like a ninja. Maybe. Hard to tell, really.

Doesn't matter—what's important at the moment is that he's probably going to have to jeopardize his position in order to get Kasim out. They'd had plans in place for helping Vespa get free and had hoped that she'd be able to snag Kasim and extract him, but Miss Marshall being arrested as well had thrown them all for a loop, and look where they were now: in a whole mess. The escape is probably going to prompt Ophion into doing something hasty, too, if the sense that Juno has gotten on the guy in these past few months is any good.

"—do now, Mistah Steel?" Rita says, and he tunes back in.

"We'll need to wait for a comm from Buddy," he says. He'd only half-heard the question, but half was enough. "Maybe I'll be able to make contact with Kasim… or Eshe."

"Mhm, right," Rita says, nodding rapidly. She darts across the room to her laptop and flips it open, then begins typing, her fingers flying across the keys. After a moment, she nods decisively and says, "Well, nothing yet of course but my inbox is empty and waiting for a message from Buddy! I'll be ready for it when it comes in, don't you

worry."

"Shouldn't you be getting some sleep?" Juno asks.

Rita shrugs expansively. "Well I had an energy drink about an hour ago, so I'm not gonna need to sleep for a while!" That does explain a few things. Like her volume, which has been steadily increasing. "I'll keep an eye out, so why don't you go sleep for a while longer yourself, because you look pretty roughed up still, boss! Vespa really did a number on you, huh?"

"She sure did," Juno says, reaching up to touch the tender place on the back of his skull where she'd punched him. And then smacked him *against the floor*, which really had felt gratuitous, though for realism's sake he gets that it was probably necessary. Still. His head hurts. "Maybe I will go lie down for a bit. Just… come get me when you get tired, alright? And I'll watch for a bit."

"Sure thing, boss." Rita beams at him, then waves as he retreats back into his mercifully dark bedroom to nap for a bit longer.

He's woken some unknown time later not by a poke in the ribs from one of Rita's unnecessarily pointy fingers, but by the beeping of his comm unit. He rolls over and slaps his hand against the bedside table where he'd left it until he finds it, and then brings it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Juno?" Cassandra's voice. "Did I wake you?"

"Yeah," Juno says, and rubs his free hand over his face. "S'okay though. What's wrong?"

"Oh—I mean, nothing, not exactly." She sounds a little anxious though, a little confused, and he tries to make his brain be more awake. "Just… do you know Eshe?"

"Uh." How best to answer that question. "Not… really? I know *of* her."

"Well, she's here, and she's said that she wants to talk to you. Do… are you able to come over?"

"Probably. One second." Juno pulls the comm away from his face, covers the mic with his hand, and shouts, "RITA!"

"YEAH, MISTAH STEEL?" she shouts back from the other room.

“YOU STILL GOOD? CASSANDRA WANTS TO SEE ME.”

“NO PROBLEMO BOSS! I HAD ANOTHER ENERGY DRINK!”

“Oh, fuck,” Juno mutters, and then brings the comm back to his ear. “Yeah, I can swing by. Gimme ten.”

“Of course. Is… Miss Rita alright?”

He laughs. “Well, she hasn’t given herself heart failure yet. See you in a minute.”

“Yes. Goodbye.” A click over the line—she’s hung up. Okay.

Juno rolls over to bury his face briefly in the pillow. Some sleep—he checks the comm, and it looks like he’s been out for about two hours—has done his headache a bit of good, but now he just feels vaguely muzzy. Well, maybe he’ll steal one of Rita’s energy drinks on the way out.

He hauls himself up out of bed, tries to brush some of the wrinkles out of his shirt, and goes looking for the pair of pants he’d shucked off earlier; they’re crumpled in a corner, also wrinkled, but there’s not much to be done about that. He stumbles out of the room still fastening his belt and when Rita makes a questioning noise from where she’s sitting with her laptop, typing… something, he says, “Apparently Eshe came to see Cassandra.”

“Huh!” Rita says, and beams up at him. “Well that’s just easy peasy then ain’t it boss! You go tell her the facts!”

“… Yeah.” Juno studies her for a minute—her eyes are a little bloodshot. “Don’t have another energy drink. Comm when you crash if I’m not already back and go to bed.”

“Alrighty dighty Mistah Steel!”

Juno waves, returns her beaming smile to the best of his ability, and steps out, heading for Cassandra’s quarters. He ignores the cameras he passes with practice, knowing that there’s a good chance that going to this meeting is going to make him look suspicious as all hell, but there’s not much to be done about it. He needs to talk to Eshe, find out what Kasim said to her, and hopefully make some sort of plan. A plan would be nice.

He really wishes he could talk to Buddy before he has to have this

conversation, but he also knows what they say about beggars and wishing. So he just sighs and makes his way through the halls of the compound—gets briefly lost, because concussions and very nondescript hallways are not friends—and finally arrives at Cassandra's door. It opens almost as soon as he knocks to reveal Cassandra herself, and she smiles at him, no strain or anxiety evident in her expression. "Juno," she says. "Come in, come in. I'm so glad to see you're alright, I heard you were in the hospital?"

"Uh," Juno says, and follows her inside. "Yeah."

As soon as the door closes, some of the warm, happy welcome in her expression and posture fades, replaced with the thread of anxiety. "I'm glad to hear it," she says, more quietly. "Eshe, Mr. Steel is here."

"Excellent," says a low, smooth voice, faintly accented, and a tall woman rises from Cassandra's couch. She has very dark skin, hair buzzed nearly to the scalp, and handsome features; she reminds Juno a little of Alessandra Strong, though slimmer and somehow even *more* terrifying. Her gaze, pale against the darkness of her skin, pierces to the bone. "A pleasure to meet you at last, Juno Steel."

"You must be Eshe," he replies. "I've heard a lot about you." That's more or less the truth.

"From your friend in the prison?" she asks, quirking an eyebrow, and Juno shrugs.

"I wouldn't call him my friend," he says. "We haven't met."

"Oh?"

Juno smiles, stepping a little closer. "Maybe you haven't heard, but I've only been on-planet a couple months, working with Enforcement for almost the entire length. I didn't exactly have time to acquaint myself with rebel insurgents."

"No, of course not." Eshe folds her hands behind her back, staring him down—she's taller than him, of course. But she's probably taller than Peter, too. "Are you a bad liar, Mr. Steel?"

"Eh," Juno wiggles a hand back and forth. "I can get by. But I prefer *not* to lie, Ms…?"

"Just Eshe," she says. "When my marriage was annulled I chose to drop my surname altogether, rather than reclaim my maiden name—

that person is dead."

"I see." Juno nods briefly, thinking back to a younger, angrier version of himself. "I understand—I changed my name when my mother died. Technically."

"Technically?"

He waves a hand. "Long story. Not the one I came here for, either. We should sit down—I think we're stressing out our host."

Indeed, Cassandra has been looking increasingly nervous where she stands just out of the line of fire, in his peripheral vision. Her hands are laced together in front of herself, and she's gripping her own fingers so tightly that her knuckles are white. "Ah," she says, when both of them turn to look at her, and bows her head slightly. "I can… get out of the way. Would the two of you like some tea while you talk, perhaps?"

"That would be lovely," Eshe says, before Juno can interject to tell her that she's welcome to stay and listen. "Thank you, my dear."

Cassandra offers Eshe a wan smile. "Of course, Eshe." Then she ducks away, scurrying into her small kitchen and beginning to bang around fairly ostentatiously, as if to prove that she's giving them some privacy.

"I assume Cassandra already told you that her rooms are clean?" Eshe says, sitting down on the couch.

Juno joins her, tucking a leg up so that he can face her squarely. "Yes. Why did you want to meet me?"

"Straight to the point." She smiles. "You remind me of him, a little. The same conviction."

Him. Abraham, probably, from the intel Buddy's passed to Rita about this woman. Safer to confirm, though, so— "Your husband, you mean?"

"Yes." The smile fades, and she gives him a square look. "The boy, Kasim. He told me that my Abraham is still alive."

"He is," Juno confirms. "I'm sure he'd like to see you again."

She waves a hand, dismissive, and then settles it back into her lap.

Her posture is so straight, so regal. “I’m sure he’s moved on. I never could quite hold his attention. And in certain ways, I have moved on too—but in others I very much have not. You see, I infiltrated the Rebellion’s base so that I might kill the ones responsible for Abraham’s death and finally put to rest the ghost that drove me, but instead I find that that spirit yet breathes, and no amount of bloody revenge will end it—not against Ransom and Julius, at least. So I must find another way to quiet my own hatred.”

“I’ve never found that revenge solves anything,” Juno says, quiet. “Killing his killers wouldn’t make him any less dead.”

“At least I would have known that those responsible were gone as well,” she says.

Juno wants to argue, to tell her that knowing that the ones responsible were dead didn’t help, but… the look in her pale eyes tells him that she knows that, and doesn’t care. She’s not angry the way he was when his mother died, or righteous in the way he was when he found Ramses; there’s no fire in her to go out and leave her with nothing but the taste of ash in her mouth. The volcano of rage and grief in her heart died a long time ago, and she’s turned to obsidian now: dark and hard and sharp enough to cut. Sharp enough to kill. So he nods and says, “So what will you do now?”

“I always meant to kill the thing that divided us,” she says. “Now I know that that thing is not a person, but this fruitless war. So I put the question to you in return, Juno Steel: what will I do now? How would you use me to end this war?”

“I wouldn’t use you,” he replies immediately. “You’re not a tool—none of us are. But if you’re willing to help us, I might be able to guide you.”

“What does the Rebellion need?”

“I don’t know yet,” Juno admits. “My contact with them has been quiet—we’re waiting for marching orders in the wake of the breakout. But it’ll probably have to do with Kasim, and since you’ve been allowed contact with him once already, we’ll probably need you there.”

She nods once. “I will make my continued interest clear to Ophion.”

“You’re that close to him?” Juno asks, surprised.

She smiles, slow and fierce. “I happen to know where several bodies are buried—and *not* the ones he’s proud of. So long as I am careful, I can get what we need.”

“Good.”

From the other side of the couch, Cassandra clears her throat softly. Juno and Eshe both look up to find her standing there with a tea tray, laden with a pot and three mugs. “I hope everything’s going alright here?” she says.

“Yes, quite well,” Eshe says, rising to help Cassandra set the tea down, and then gracefully surrenders her place on the couch to sit in the armchair instead. Cassandra lets out a sigh once she’s seated, and doesn’t even make a move to help as Eshe bends forward to pour the tea.

“Are you alright?” Juno asks, watching the way Cassandra has settled a hand on her belly.

“Yes,” she says, and though there’s some strain in her face her voice is certain. “Just… I desperately hope this war will end soon, and Jason can come home.”

“We’ll do all we can to ensure he doesn’t miss the birth of his child,” Eshe says, and leans over to press a mug into Cassandra’s hands—a green tea of some sort, with a mild scent.

Juno gets his own mug from the tray and blows on it before saying, “Yeah. Don’t worry about a thing, Cassandra.”

She looks up at him, swallowing a tentative sip of tea. “I’ll do what I can to help,” she says. “I heard you mention my father—I don’t… he doesn’t listen to me very well, but I might be able to do *something*. I know how to handle him.”

“As do I,” Eshe says, sipping her own tea.

“Depending on what we need,” Juno says, “you two might be able to tag-team it. Safer for you both.”

Eshe nods. “A good point.”

“Thank you, Juno,” Cassandra says. She leans forward slightly to put her mug down, and reaches over to lay her hand on his arm. “Your concern for me is appreciated, I hope you know that.”

Juno shrugs, discomfited by the sudden sincerity. “I can be an asshole, but I’m not going to put a bystander in danger just because it might be easier.”

“I’m not a bystander.” Cassandra’s voice is firm, and when he meets her eyes, they’re resolute. “I have been involved in my father’s war from the moment of my birth, on account of the *circumstances* of my birth, and that until now I’ve been a coward doesn’t make me uninvolved. I could have been brave long before this.”

“Recklessness and bravery aren’t the same thing,” Juno says. “Neither are self-sacrifice and bravery. You had your own shit to deal with, growing up with that guy, and that’s burden enough for anyone.”

“Mr. Steel is right,” Eshe cuts in, and Cassandra glances over at her. She looks calm, firm and resolved; Juno’s sure there’s a similar expression on his own face. “I have known you for many years, Cassandra, and though you have kept yourself distant from this war, you are by no means a coward.”

“I should have stood up to my father years ago.”

“I stood up to my mother,” Juno says with a shrug. “Plenty of times. It only made her hate me more, and in the end, I wasn’t the one who bore the brunt of that anger—there’s no telling what would have happened if you’d chosen to try to fight Ophion more directly earlier, but he’s the kind of guy who’s real good at punishing someone by hurting someone else.”

Cassandra looks down at her lap, reclaims her mug and wraps her hands around it as if to draw in the warmth. “Yes,” she says, quietly, heavily. “I suppose I had forgotten. Well. I will do what I can now.”

“I know.” Juno nods at her, once, and then chugs the remainder of his tea—winces a little at the lingering heat—and stands up. “I should go. Get back to Rita, talk plans, get a message to our contacts… there’s lots to do. And suspicion to avoid.”

“Business as usual until one of us contacts the other,” Eshe agrees. She rises as well, setting down her mug for the time being, and bows her head politely to Juno. “I wasn’t sure what to expect from you, Mr. Steel, but I find you are a person worthy of respect. I look forward to working with you.”

“Yeah,” Juno says, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck, and returns the little bow of the head. He’s sure the gesture doesn’t look

half as graceful or regal on himself. “You too. Take care—and we’ll talk soon, huh?”

“Indeed.”

Juno says a quick goodbye to Cassandra, who seems lost in thought, and takes his leave to make his way back. A quick walk after a quick meeting, but the whole compound is buzzing after the breakout so one more person moving briskly through the halls doesn’t draw much attention at all, and no one stops him before he gets back.

When he arrives, Rita is still ensconced in her chair, and he bullies her up and into bed—she looks half-wrecked, the caffeine and sugar high wearing off, and she’s snoring before he can get back out of her room. Not that he’s not tired himself, but they’re still waiting on the confirmation that Vespa and Ms. Marshall made it back to the warm and welcoming arms of the Rebellion safely, so with a sigh he sits down at the computer himself and sets himself to the task of watching, his mind turning over possibilities as he waits.

Chapter 6

Miri Marshall is extremely surly. Not that Peter can entirely blame her, but the Rebellion *has* saved her from early consignment to a shallow grave, so she could be at least a *little* less rude to everyone who tries to talk to her. The first time he tries to approach her, she calls him "a paper-thin excuse for a person" and tells him to "walk his skinny ass away before she kicks it," which really seems unnecessary. He's been perfectly polite to her in return. She is a guest of the Rebellion—though he hopes she'll only be with them for a short time.

Fortunately, it seems like events are beginning to come to a head. With Vespa and Ms. Marshall's escape, but Kasim's continued imprisonment, time is short to take action. Buddy arranges to get a message to Juno, a precarious proposition as always but at least practiced by now, and lets him and Rita know that Vespa has been safely recovered by the Rebellion and is recovering from the aftereffects of her captivity. They receive a message in return saying that Juno is in contact with Eshe and with Ophion's daughter, and that they're ready to move when the time comes.

Two days after that, Enforcement puts out a broadcast. Peter is sitting in the dining hall when it happens, and someone comes running in with a radio, already turned up as loud as it goes, and shouts, "Everyone shut the fuck up!"

Silence falls in fits and starts, and the crackling voice of the radio—Ophion's voice and cadence—washes over the room, saying, "—incursion, it is more important than ever that the populace come together under a single banner. Chaos cannot be allowed to reign. And we will not let it. The Rebellion is weak, unjust, unlawful, and unfit; they cannot protect the people of Brahma. They cannot even protect themselves. The city will crumble in their hands. Death will walk the streets. I promise you, one and all, I will prevent this madness from overtaking us. We will come together, rise together, stand together; we will live together, in harmony and in control of ourselves. We will not let them tear us apart. We will not fall. Thank you."

Static.

"Rubbish!" shouts someone across the room. "That bastard doesn't know what he's talking about—death *already* walks the streets!"

Cheers and shouting, people chiming in in agreement. Peter just sits

quietly and looks down at his plate of food—dry rations, a cup of water. He can only think that Ophion's broadcast means that he has some sort of plan. Of course, he's not going to announce it in anything like as public a manner as he did his attempted execution of Peter himself—they're too vulnerable, and the Rebellion has too much intelligence as it is. But he's planning *something*, and so Peter quietly hands off his meal to a group of scouts at a nearby table, who receive the extra portion with gratitude, and goes to find Buddy.

He doesn't find her—she's absent, maybe holed up in her quarters with Vespa. But Jet, recently returned from another day trip out into a nearby quadrant to gauge the public temperament, is standing in the hall near their rooms, and he's talking to Ms. Marshall. Of course. Peter restrains a sigh and puts on a mild face, prepared for more vitriol, but as he draws closer he sees that Ms. Marshall's face is tense and pale but not angry, not flushed with spite the way she has been every time he's seen her in the days since she arrived, clinging onto Vespa on the back of a stolen hovercycle.

"—safe," Jet says, as Peter draws close enough to hear. Jet places a hand on Ms. Marshall's shoulder—against her much smaller figure, his hand looks almost comically oversized. But she sinks into the contact a little, lets out a sigh.

"Thank you," she says, heartfelt. "Thank you, I can't—"

"You needn't," Jet says. "I understand. I cannot return to your quadrant for some time, lest a pattern become noticable, but I will ensure that the next scout in that direction knows to bring news if possible."

"Alright." Ms. Marshall rubs a hand across her face then through her hair. "Did… did he look okay? I mean, not too… stressed out, or anything?"

"He looked concerned," Jet says. "I saw some signs of stress. But he was dealing in a calm manner with a customer at the reception of your business."

"Gods, of course he kept the office open," Ms. Marshall says, with a bit of a laugh, and then catches sight of Peter approaching over Jet's shoulder and her mouth snaps shut, her expression going tense once more. "Oh. You."

"Yes, me," Peter says, and tries on a smile—it only makes her look more tense. "I apologize for interrupting. Jet, do you know where

Buddy has gotten to?"

"No," he says. "I believe the other members of the leadership were gathered in the map room, however."

"Thank you." If Buddy's not in with Mag and Abraham, she'll probably turn up there eventually. And they likely know about the broadcast already. "I'll let you get back to it."

"No, we're done," Ms. Marshall says, brusque. She glances up at Jet, then brushes his hand off her shoulder. "Thank you for the news."

"In times like these, it is important to know our loved ones are well, if at all possible," Jet says.

"Yeah." Ms. Marshall purses her lips. "One less thing to worry about, I guess. Not that it really helps, since I can't go back."

"You're safe in the tunnels," Peter points out. "And you will be able to go home soon."

"Yeah, but I'm a fucking criminal now," Ms. Marshall spits, suddenly hostile again. She turns to look at Peter, her shoulders held high and square. "Maybe people like *you* don't care about that, but I had a normal life before this. I own—owned, gods know—a business, I have a partner, relationships, a family. I was innocent; I could've gone back to all that. Now I get to die for your cause or maybe, *maybe*, if by some wild chance you manage to succeed, I'll get my life back. But I'll *always* be a criminal to some people now, got it? And I'm *not* safe here, or anywhere. So… so you can just *fuck off*."

"They were never going to let you go," Peter says, instantly tired of her naivete. "If we hadn't broken you out, they'd have executed you without remorse."

"They had no evidence! I did nothing wrong!"

"They don't care," Peter says bluntly, crossing his arms across his chest. Jet steps back a little, letting them face one another, but doesn't leave. "They don't care at all who's *innocent* and who's *guilty*, they care who might be a danger to their power."

"I *know* that," Ms. Marshall says, "but I'm *not*. I never was."

"You own a business, you said?" He waits for her to nod, then continues, "Part of the community, you'd say? A pillar of it, even?

Then you were a threat; you just never realized it, because you were blind. If you could have rallied people behind you, if they loved you, you were a threat. They talk about rising together, about being *one people*, but Enforcement has always thrived on keeping us separate."

"What would *you* know about it?" she spits, leaning in. "You're just some false prophet that the Magpie dreamed up. A fake."

"I grew up on this planet," Peter replies, and takes a pale sort of pleasure in the way she jolts back, shocked. "Do you know what we used to say when someone vanished? *Everyone dies alone on Brahma*. That's how it was 20 years ago, and I suspect that's how it is now."

Ms. Marshall is silent for a minute. Then she says, "We should be better than that."

"We never will be with Ophion in charge," Peter says. His shoulders are tense, and he restrains a swift gesture of his hand; he'll only make her flinch. "Call me a false prophet if you like—I never meant to be what Mag made me. I never even knew about it. I only returned to Brahma a few months ago. But if I've learned anything since I got away from this gods-forsaken planet, it's that if you want a better life, you have to *make one*. And none of us, not one, can do it alone."

Jet clears his throat, then says to Ms. Marshall in a much gentler tone, "The Rebellion has flaws, this is true. We see it too, with the benefit of an outsiders' perspective. Ultimately, however, they fight for your freedom as much as their own."

Ms. Marshall's mouth twists. "I just wish my freedom hadn't cost me my *fucking freedom*," she says, and turns away, a visible and desperate grab for the last dangling threads of her temper before she loses it entirely.

"It may seem like that is the case," Jet says, "but I think you will find that peace will come again. All wars end."

"Of all people, I'd think you would be the least likely to believe that," Peter interjects, looking at Jet curiously.

"On the contrary," Jet says. He spreads his hands, a slow demonstrative gesture. "I have fought several wars, both internal and external, and I have managed to find some modicum of peace. Thus, I understand war, and I hate it with significant vigour, but I also understand that it *must* end."

“How much more is it going to cost?” Ms. Marshall asks. Her voice is plaintive; Peter is reminded abruptly that she’s at least a decade his junior. She’s a pillar of her community, maybe, and maybe she has a life—but she’s very young. Young and grieving the loss of seemingly her whole life, in the way that Peter himself had had to grieve when he left Brahma, Mag’s blood still caught under his fingernails. “What else am I going to have to pay to see peace in my lifetime? Who else has to die? And *why*?”

Jet reaches out and places a hand on her shoulder once more, and she leans into the touch more obviously this time, a wave of exhaustion sweeping over her face, wiping away the anger that had been there before. “I cannot tell you the cost,” Jet says, “and you may reckon it differently at different times after it has been paid. We all do and redo these calculations.”

“I’ve spent a lot of my life doing cost-benefit analysis,” Peter says, quietly, and takes a step toward her. She doesn’t shrink away or go tense, just looks up at him with dark eyes. “My friend here is right. What seems worth it at the time may later seem like too much, and other times like you would have paid much more for the same. But hindsight is something else. For now… you said your friend was well? Jet told you that much?”

“Yes,” she says.

“Then you do have something to hold onto,” Peter says. “My own lover is out there too, and your and Vespa’s arrival meant that he’s still alive. If I have that, the rest matters less.”

Ms. Marshall lets out a breath, then nods. “Your lover… he’s out in the quadrants?”

“Embedded in Enforcement as a spy,” Peter says, shaking his head. Then he smiles. “You met him.”

“Wh—you mean Mr. *Steel*? He’s with you?” she looks wide-eyed. “I… I had no idea.”

“He’s very capable,” Peter says, with a nod. “I hope he made a good impression.”

“… Yes.” Ms. Marshall ducks her head. “He’s a good person. Better than I expected to meet in there. I’ve heard the stories.”

Peter smiles proudly—of course Juno had been good to this woman,

made her feel some measure of safety even in the most dangerous moments of her life. That was what Juno did; that was who Juno *was*. Peter has never been anything less than grateful for the measure of that same protective warmth that has been afforded to him, time and time again, even when he had done very little to deserve it.

"It is always Juno's honour to protect the innocent wherever possible," Jet says, and Peter can see him squeeze Ms. Marshall's shoulder gently. "And you are innocent here. I'm sure he was glad to be able to help you."

"He… yeah." She looks up again. "If I don't see him again, once this is all over, pass him my thanks."

"We will," Peter says, and glances up at Jet, who nods and lets go of Ms. Marshall's shoulder. "I need to find Buddy—I think I'll seek out the rest of leadership. Are you going to keep Ms. Marshall company, Jet?"

"If she would like," Jet says.

Ms. Marshall nods, small. "Yes. I... Thank you. Maybe—"

"We will go find a meal, and sit down for a while," Jet declares, and begins steering her away.

Peter gives a little wave and watches them vanish down the hall. It's nice that Jet has found someone to take under his wing, he thinks; it cheers him up to have a duckling to shepherd about, and Ms. Marshall, for all her spit and vinegar, makes a good one. That moment of vulnerability he'd seen in her—well. Once, he was the kind of man who would have taken advantage of that to get ahead. Now, all he can think is that he once upon a time he was that young, that soft, and living on Brahma. He can only hope that the experience won't do to her what it did to him.

He makes his way up through the tunnels toward the command centre, nodding to Rebellion members that he recognizes as he passes, and eventually comes to the door—closed, unusually. Most of the time, the leadership leaves the door open, giving members of their small faction access to them at need—but not right now, for whatever reason. A small seed of forboding plants itself in Peter's gut, and when he opens the door to find Mag and Abraham glaring at one another over the table, that forboding only grows.

"Gentlemen," Peter says, drawing their attention to him. "What's

happening?"

"A message came in from your Juno," Abraham says, his voice tight with some unknown emotion—anger, grief? Peter can't tell, but he feels himself go tense in response, and a bolt of worry flashes through him. "They're going to execute Kasim."

Peter closes his eyes. Well. That's not as bad as he'd expected—at least Juno is safe. And though this is terrible… perhaps they have time. "When?"

"Soon," Mag says. "Probably too soon to mobilize—not without risk."

"Not if we *take Eshe's offer*," Abraham snarls, whirling back around. "You know damn well that we should do it!"

"She can't be trusted!" Mag replies. "She's one of *them*, Abraham, and you damn well know it. You were willing to sacrifice her years ago because you *knew* what side she was on. What the hell changed?"

"Nothing," Abraham says, "but knowing that someone may die because they're in the wrong place at the wrong time isn't the same as spitting in their face when they offer you everything you want. Don't think that I felt nothing when I thought I had killed her, Mag. I loved her once."

"*Gentlemen*," Peter repeats, more intent, and they break off again. "What is the offer?"

"She wants to swoop in and steal power," Mag says, at the same time as Abraham says, "She's offered to help us kill Ophion in exchange for some control over her own fate."

Peter sighs. It's like herding cats, really. "In plainer terms than that, please," he says.

Abraham picks up a datapad displaying a few lines of text from the table between them and holds it out for Peter to take. It's the work of a moment to read the message: *Kasim to be executed in two weeks. Coordinates 18.29.621. Public, but w/ heavy guard; personnel attached. Eshe says, can ensure Ophion is killed if we can handle crossfire, but in return wants some control over Enforcement during post-O reconciliation process. Juno advises, take the deal; response needed ASAP.*

"Reconciliation process?" Peter murmurs. "When did this come in?"

“With the beginning of the broadcast,” Abraham says. “We think Rita piggybacked the message.”

So, half an hour, maybe an hour ago, depending on how long Ophion had been monologuing before that kid with the radio had burst into the dining hall. They’ve probably been arguing since then. “I see. Where’s Buddy?”

“Your guess is good as mine, Pete,” Mag says with a shrug. “Probably on her way.”

“Mm.” Peter looks down at the message again, strokes his thumb across the four letters that make up Juno’s name, and says, “I’m with Abraham. We might have the forces to take the guard in an all-out assault, which would have its advantages, but Ophion is likely to slip away again.”

“It’s too risky,” Mag says. “If she backstabs us, we’ll lose dozens of fighters *and* Ophion will get away.” He pauses, catches the look on Abraham’s face, and adds, “And Kasim will probably die, of course.”

“On the other hand, if this is a success, Kasim will be saved and we will rid ourselves of Ophion in one fell swoop. There is a real opportunity here,” Abraham says. He leans forward, pressing his palms to the table.

Behind Peter, the door slides open once more, and he glances over to see Buddy step into the room, Vespa following at her shoulder. “Gentlemen,” Buddy says, and Peter smiles a little—he’s stolen all his newest best tricks from her. “I take it there was a message from Juno.”

Before Mag and Abraham can get into it again, Peter passes Buddy the datapad that he’s still holding. She and Vespa both read it, and then Buddy looks up and says, “So, how do we intend to do this?”

“We’re not,” Mag says immediately. His arms are crossed tightly across his chest, a posture which always makes him look puffed-up. “It’s a mistake.”

“I refuse to sacrifice Kasim,” Abraham says.

“Fine, but we’re not taking the deal. We rescued Pete; we have the means to get Kasim out too.”

“And lose Ophion in the process!”

“She can’t be *trusted*, Abraham, you know that!”

“Boys!” Buddy snaps. “Enough. Whether or not Eshe is trustworthy is moot, as Mag does not know her, Abraham’s opinion is compromised, and none of the rest of us have met her, other than Peter.”

“I hardly had time to form an impression,” Peter drawls, and Buddy nods at him.

“Precisely. All we have to go off is Juno’s recommendation, and personally I would stake my life on *his* judgement,” Buddy says. Peter knows that’s not entirely true—she always prefers to corroborate. But the crew of the *Carte Blanche* has learned how to rely on one another, and Peter knows that Juno has learned a sharp lesson or two in who can and cannot be trusted in the past few years.

“That’s all well and good,” Mag begins, a little snide, but Peter cuts him off.

“It *is* well and good,” Peter says. “Abraham is right. We will never get another opportunity this good—we *must* assault the execution.”

“Fine, but we’re still not taking the deal,” Mag says. He’s got a stubborn set to his jaw.

“I thought you were gung-ho to have Ophion killed immediately,” Peter says mildly. He crosses his own arms, mimicking Mag’s posture, and watches as Mag’s attention catches on him. “This might be our only shot to do it for a *long* time—if we do assault him and he slips away, he’ll surely raise security.”

“Making this attack will also reveal that we have a mole,” Buddy points out. “We’re unlikely to get a second shot, and if we do it might be at a cost we can’t afford to pay.”

Juno’s life, she means. Or Rita’s, or both. Even Cassandra and Eshe would be in danger.

“There’s a further opportunity here that you seem to have missed, as well,” Buddy continues, and steps forward to look down at the personnel list that Mag and Abraham were posturing over. She peers down at it for a few minutes, then nods once and smiles. “As I suspected—Ophion intends to take a substantial portion of his forces with him, including all of his most loyal and skilled, to prevent the sort of cockup that we engineered last time. That will leave Enforcement headquarters vulnerable.”

Immediately, Abraham makes an interested noise and begins shuffling papers around, finally pulling out a comparative personnel list as well as a map of the compound. “You’re right,” he says to Buddy. “If he takes this many men… we’d have a chance of taking the Headquarters, particularly with Juno and Mrs. Thalas on the inside.”

“We can’t risk splitting our own forces,” Mag says, stubborn. “Better to focus on rescuing your boy—lover,” *boytoy*, he’d been about to say, and Abraham knows it from the dark look that passes over his face, “and taking out Ophion. Headquarters is a separate problem, one we can deal with once the head’s been cut off the snake.”

“There’ll be no better opportunity,” Peter says. “And I’m sure you’ve heard that story about cauterizing the snake’s neck, lest it grow two heads in the place of the first, Mag. This is our chance to do just that —I’ll volunteer to lead the force, if that makes you feel better. I’m confident that I can infiltrate and take control.”

“… Maybe,” Mag says. He looks around at all of them, sees them looking back, shoulder-to-shoulder-to-shoulder, and seems to accept that he’s going to lose this one. He could surely manipulate any one of them to his side, but not *all* of them, and not with Juno and Kasim on the line. “Fine. Fine. I still say it’s an idiot move to take Eshe’s *deal* though.”

“We’ll need someone on the inside, someone *not* disgraced or mistrusted, to help us take control of Enforcement,” Abraham says. He waves at the papers in front of them. “For all this planning, we can’t kill *every* Enforcement officer, and we’ll be better off if someone we know will work with us takes command.”

“I thought that was what we were keeping Jason around for,” Mag says, raising an eyebrow. He rocks back on his heels a little, to better meet Abraham’s eyes.

“We’ve been over this,” Abraham says, his voice tight with annoyance. “He might be able to serve in that capacity, but we have no guarantees—between his captive status and his ties to Ophion, he might fall swiftly out of favour. We need someone in good standing to seize control on their side, and if we have multiple people who might be able to play that role, all the better.”

“Eshe’s outside their hierarchy,” Buddy says mildly. When Abraham turns a glare on her, she shrugs. “I agree that we should take her deal, but it will be less simple than we might like to think. That’s all.”

“Obviously it’s not going to be simple.” Abraham turns, paces away from the table and then back. “We need to do this.”

“Yes.” Peter steps forward, places a hand on Abraham’s shoulder. He can understand the other man’s agitation. “We will. We have two weeks to plan and mobilize—we should begin immediately.”

Mag sighs, looking around at all of them again, and says, “*Fine*. But if this all blows up in your faces—”

“You’ll be welcome to say ‘I told you so’,” Buddy says, in the tone of a person who very much thinks that he won’t be having the opportunity. Time, planning, their resources… the moment has come to lay it all down on the table, because if this works, it will be the end of the war. And if they fail… well, it might still be the end, only a very different one than they all hope for.

Chapter 7

Two weeks seems like a lot of time when you're on the front end of it, but there's a lot to get done, a lot to put in place, between the day that Eshe comes to Juno and tells him that Ophion plans to execute Kasim, but that she's managed to convince him to make it public and therefore vulnerable, and the day that it is set to happen. Rita's working overtime making sure the flurry of messages passing back and forth between Juno and Buddy are secure and secret, and Juno himself is trapped in a cycle of *hurry up and wait*. The most he might be able to do is get access to Kasim to make sure he's not being tortured too badly in an effort to extract information before he's killed, but he figures out pretty quickly that he won't be able to do it without arousing suspicion.

The only break he gets is when Alexei takes him aside quietly to ask him to join the force meant to be defending Kasim's execution from Rebellion attacks—he's still recovering from a concussion, technically, but he doesn't hesitate to agree. All the better if he's there, he thinks; Eshe will be there as well, a holdout blaster beneath her clothes, if he knows her at all. She's told him that she has a plan, and Juno's pretty sure that plan involves shooting Ophion in the back at the first opportunity. He hasn't asked.

How she managed to convince him to make it a public execution in the first place is a bit of a wonder, but he doesn't ask that, either—he's learned a few things about Eshe, and one of them is that she has her ways. Juno's happy to stay out of it. She's… political in a way that he can't entirely wrap his head around, and frankly doesn't want to.

Which leaves him plenty of time to check over his gear and attend strategy meetings and meet the people he'll be standing guard beside and generally try to act normal, as if he doesn't care at all about Kasim and what's happening to him in Interrogation and what's *going* to happen to him if they fail. He's assigned to a four-person unit, and they're given a specific approach to guard. This time, they're not going to be in a public square, they're going to be in a stadium; more defensible, though it's got its problems. The big one is going to be crowd control, because once all hell breaks loose—which Juno is quite confident it will—there is possibility of a stampede, and people might get hurt. In a space with such limited entrances and exits, the danger is twice as much as it was in the square where Ophion had tried to execute Peter.

On the other hand, having such limited entrances and exits also means that the guard positions are going to be predictable. Juno dutifully makes sure that everything he knows about the arrangements for the constables on duty gets back to Buddy, but it's pretty run-of-the-mill. Ophion is a highly effective political mind, but he's not much of a strategist, and his general dislike of having anyone smarter than him working in any position near him means that not many of those in command of Enforcement have much of a head for it either. No wonder they've been losing a guerilla war against a Rebellion with a small force and even fewer supplies, is all Juno can think.

But it's to his advantage. He gets to know the guards he'll be with a little bit: one is an 18-year-old straight out of the academy, loyal to Ophion and talented but not likely to be much of a threat; one is a scarred older man by the name of Rikard, who seems likely to be more of an issue, because he's well trained in close-combat and a veteran of a number of scuffles with the Rebellion; and the last is Aedan, a man a few years Juno's junior who handles a blaster like he was born with it in his hands. He's *certainly* going to be a problem, because while he thinks he can handle Rikard and the kid, if Aedan manages to get a shot off at Juno once he turns on them, he's not likely to miss. Still, that's a bridge that Juno is going to have to cross when he gets to it, so they drill their positions and shifting through them during a watch to prevent loss of focus, and he puts in the mandatory hours in the shooting range in the week leading up to the execution, and he… waits.

The morning of Kasim's intended execution, Juno wakes just before his alarm and stares at the ceiling, breathing slowly. It doesn't work as well as he'd hoped to calm the anxiety bubbling up in him—if this goes wrong, he's probably going to die, and if he's unlucky he'll probably get tortured first. But if it goes right, he might get to see Peter again. It's been a long few weeks, a long few *months* since they arrived on this planet, and this is it.

"I can do this," Juno reminds himself, and then rolls over in time to smack his alarm just as it goes off. In the other room, he hears Rita's alarm doing the same, and pries himself out of bed to make coffee—she's sure not going to do it. She's probably going to snooze for another 15 minutes. It's fine. She's staying behind, so she doesn't have to be up just yet.

While the coffee's brewing in the shitty little pot that Juno requisitioned for their rooms, he ducks back into his room and gets dressed, sliding his coat, long relegated to his closet, on over the

Enforcement uniform. It makes him feel more like himself, and will hopefully prevent Rebellion friendly fire once it all starts.

Coffee, breakfast, brush teeth. Rita gets up and wanders into the kitchen to cram two thirds of an entire slice of toast into her mouth, and mumbles, “G’morning Mistah Steel,” through it.

“Don’t choke,” Juno advises.

She chews and swallows and says, “I won’t! You ready for all this? Pretty exciting day we’ve got ahead of us!”

“No kidding.” Juno leans back in his chair, stretches. “I’m ready. You?”

“Oh yeah. Here.” Rita ducks out into the main room and comes back after a moment and the faint sounds of rummaging with a small piece of tech in her hand—a hidden comm, Juno realizes. “For us to keep in touch! Left ear, since you’ll put your regular Enforcement one in your right.”

“Thanks.” Juno slots the comm in. “Will you be in the control centre?”

“Yeah, yeah, they got me on monitor duty again today. I ain’t in charge of your unit, Mistah Steel, but I’ll be keeping an eye out!” Rita grins. “Just call me your eyes in the sky, huh?”

“I’m sure I can count on you,” Juno says. He finishes his coffee and gets up, then leans over to kiss Rita’s cheek. “Take care of yourself today, huh?”

“We’ll be just fine, Mistah Steel,” she replies, smiling up at him. “Now you go get ‘em!”

“Will do.” He hopes. He double checks that his holster is fastened correctly and then retrieves his blaster from the lockbox on the wall on his way out. According to the plans, he’ll be issued a rifle, too, but he’s always felt more comfortable with his personal weapon; he knows Aedan is likely to be using a smaller, more personalized gun, too.

He makes his way not to the shared office of the constables but down, into the basement hastily dug after the compound was erected. The basement is home to two things: an armoury, and a morgue. He’s never been into the latter, and never wants to visit it, but he knows it’s in the basement because there are people outside this compound who would kill without hesitation to get inside; anything to reclaim

the remains of their loved ones.

No one's ever gotten inside. The Rebellion has teams dedicated to searching for shallow graves… and a watcher on the cremation kilns, photographing the faces of the dead in hopes of identification.

God, Juno can't wait to get off this fucking planet.

The armoury is busy when he arrives, constables bustling to and fro. Everyone's been issued a layer of body armour and a rifle, and a handgun for those not already equipped with one. Those with training are strapping knives to their legs. Juno joins a line and waits as patiently as possible (not very patiently) to get to the front, where a clerk asks him, "Preferred weapon?"

"Fists," he says, then shows the woman the handgun he has in his holster. "I have this, too."

"Alright," she says, and steps away from the desk to retrieve a rifle, a vest, and… a set of knuckledusters. Huh. "Here. Sign here." She taps a place on the form in front of her, and Juno signs then steps away to arm himself.

The vest goes on easy. He hasn't worn one since his HPD days, and god, wasn't *that* a long time ago now—but the feeling is familiar. He double checks the straps out of still-ingrained habit, even twenty years later, then slings his rifle over his shoulder and fits the knuckledusters into a pocket in his jacket. Easy enough access, he decides.

His squad has a muster point back on the first floor, in a large hall where other squads are also gathering, so he goes back upstairs and reports for duty. Aedan is already there; Rikard and the kid are lagging behind.

"Morning," Aedan says when Juno arrives and taps his ident chip on the reader to mark himself as ready.

"Morning," Juno replies, glancing carefully at the other man. As he'd suspected, Aedan has a handgun of his own—two, in fact, in matching shoulder holsters. A few years back, it's the sort of thing Juno would have found attractive, especially paired with Aedan's broad, handsome features and tidy tail of red hair. Now, all he can think is that he's probably going to have to shoot this man in a few hours, or else get shot *by* him, and he's not really looking forward to it.

"Are you ready?" Aedan asks.

Juno peers at him, startled. “I… yeah. I guess. Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Aedan’s hand rises to his chest to touch something under his shirt, and he sighs. “Yeah. Me too.” There’s a pause, and then he says, “Do you ever—?”

Rikard walks up to them, interrupting whatever Aedan’s about to say. He doesn’t continue the thought even after he’s exchanged a brief hello with Rikard. He just falls silent, and stays that way as the kid arrives too. Then they wait.

The call comes soon after the kid joins them, a chime ringing through the room they’re gathering in, and everyone snaps to attention. Over a loudspeaker, a voice begins reading out transport assignments, and as soon as Juno hears the tag for their team he moves, the rest of the squad falling into formation with him as the walk through the halls. A few other constables are standing by here and there, watching them go in solemn silence. Faces Juno recognizes, some of them—and some he doesn’t. It doesn’t matter; he’s probably not going to see any of them again after today. If this is the end, the Carte Blanche is going to get the hell off this planet posthaste, at least if Juno has anything to say about it. He fucking hates this planet, and he can only *imagine* what being here must be doing to Peter.

He shifts his rifle strap a little higher on his shoulder and lets out a sigh, drawing a glance from Aedan and from the kid; Rickard ignores all of them, his gaze set forward. Already in the mindset of a fight, Juno can tell. Not a *great* sign.

“Nothing,” Juno mutters under his breath, when it looks like the kid is going to ask. He just shakes his head, and they continue their walk out through Enforcement command and out to the waiting fleet of transports.

As they travel, skipping swiftly through the skies of Brahma above run-down buildings and shabby residences, dirty streets and the upturned faces of the people below, Juno calculates mentally how many of these vehicles the Rebellion is likely to be able to commandeer. Not all of them, he doesn’t think; even if they did they wouldn’t have the fuel to use them. Some, though. The exercise is enough to keep his mind off what’s coming, and it’s almost a surprise when they arrive at their destination.

The stadium where the execution is set to take place is an old sports arena, not that there’ve been many sports going on here in quite some

time. At least five thousand seats, Juno estimates, probably more, and only twelve ground-level entrances, spaced evenly around the oval building. Juno and his squad are assigned to one of the doors, standing outside. it's enough to make Juno think that they're not a particularly well-trusted bunch. If they were, they'd be inside; as it is, they'll be the wall that the first wave of the Rebellion is meant to break upon, and if *they* break instead, well. There are more teams behind them, waiting.

Juno doesn't know the exact details of the Rebellion's assault plan, but he knows that he's probably going to see a fight today, so once they're in position he puts his hand on his blaster and braces himself.

The four members of the squad are standing in a square: Juno and Aedan further back, as the more capable snipers, with their backs to the door, and then Rickard and the kid up front, ready to face a threat. That suits Juno just fine. He'll have plenty of opportunity to take down Rickard, and he suspects that whoever the Rebellion sends will be able to handle the kid and *hopefully* keep Aedan busy long enough for Juno to stun him.

They've arrived to set up early, of course, so there's time to wait. About an hour before the execution is set to take place, civilians begin trickling in, passing their squad to have their IDs checked by another team just inside the door. Juno keeps a wary eye out, but doesn't recognize anyone passing by, doesn't see any sign of a signal. He waits.

Half an hour passes, then forty-five minutes, and the civilians stop arriving. Most everyone who's coming is here. The tension only ratchets higher. If the Rebellion is going to make a move—

Above Juno's head, something explodes. All four members of the squad flinch and duck as shards of concrete and clouds of dust begin raining down around them, and the wine of hoverbikes fills the air. Not far away, Juno hears the telltale sound of blasterfire, and figures that this is as good a chance as he'll get.

He pulls his blaster and shoots—Rickard first, and the man goes down with a shocked sound, taking the stun straight to the back. There's a split second, and the kid turns in time to meet Juno's eye before he gets a stun blast too. Then Juno whirls on Aedan. Aedan already has his blaster out, aimed at Juno, and they stare each other down for a tense moment. Juno's finger tightens on the trigger—Aedan raises his weapon to the sky and puts his hands up.

“Hold on,” he says, “stun me if you need, but—you’re defecting too?”

Juno laughs, a little incredulous. “I never technically *a*ffected, if you want to put it that way. I’m a spy.” Sort of.

“*Oh*,” Aedan says. “Oh, fuck, okay. Look, I don’t—I want to help the Rebellion.”

“Don’t shoot me in the back and you’ll be fine,” Juno says. “Maybe ditch the coat—or, in a minute, once we’re inside. Follow my lead.”

“Okay,” Aedan says, and lowers his hands, bringing his blaster back to a ready position. “Lead on.”

Juno nods once, and then turns on his heel and sprints for the door, shouting “Rebels behind! Blasters up!”

The squad of four constables at the door let the two of them run past, searching the slowly fading cloud of dust outside for the rebels Juno had warned them of; they’re totally unprepared when he and Aedan turn and stun all four of them.

“Fuck,” Aedan whispers, once all four bodies have slumped to the floor. “Gods.”

“You’d think it would be harder to shoot people who’re supposed to trust you,” Juno says, bleak, “but it’s actually easier.”

“Yeah.” Aedan swallows, glances sidelong at Juno as he begins stripping off his Enforcement uniform jacket. “You’ve done this sort of thing before?”

“Been on the receiving end, more like,” Juno says, thinking about those first few arrests by the HCPD during the bad years, when the arresting officers had been people he’d shared a bullpen with. “And none of them ever seemed to hesitate much. You do what you think you have to, I guess.”

“What you *think* you have to,” Aedan says, and then laughs once, dry.

“I’ll stun you now if you don’t want any more part in this,” Juno says. He doesn’t add that he can’t guarantee Aedan’s safety when the constables around him wake up and remember he turned on them.

But it seems he doesn’t need to—Aedan shakes his head, says, “I’m in this now. Where next?”

“We need to clear this exit,” Juno says, waving forward. “We’re going to have civilians running this way in a minute; best if they can run freely.”

“Okay.”

There are two squads ahead of them, one guarding the bottom of the stairs up to the second spectator level and one at the top, guarding the upstairs entrance to the stands; the decision had been made by someone on high to block off the upper levels. The first team they take out easy, having held onto the element of surprise, but the second clearly gets a clue and begins shooting down at them, forcing Juno and Aedan to take cover behind an out of service concession stand. They crouch side-by-side behind the counter, and Juno listens carefully, hears the clunk of boots on the steps—two up, giving covering fire, and two coming down to hunt them out of their cover. Juno glances at Aedan, then says, “I’ll vault over and hit one of them. You shoot the other before he shoots me.”

“Risky,” Aedan says, but he readies his blaster. Juno holsters his own gun and pulls out the knuckledusters, fitting them over his hands. “How’re you going to dodge the guys at the top?”

“It’ll be fine,” Juno says, with confidence that he only vaguely feels.

He listens carefully, judges the distance as best he can—then hurls himself over the counter of the concession stand and toward the pair of constables advancing toward them. Shocked, they take a moment too long to raise their weapons, and he’s on them fast, going for the one who’s slower getting his gun up. The other has time to aim before he gets a blaster shot in the face from Aedan. Juno’s constable gets a fist instead; Juno feels the messy crunch of breaking bone, and the guy collapses to the floor, dazed, and drops his weapon. A moment later, a blaster bolt hits him too, knocking him out cold.

Juno dodges to the side, ready for fire from above, but it doesn’t come. Instead, someone at the top of the stairs calls down, “Good form, Steel.”

Juno looks up and grins: standing at the top of the steps, resplendent in a black jumpsuit with her red hair tumbling around her shoulders, is Buddy. “Thanks for not letting me get shot, Buddy,” he replies, straightening from his crouch. He jerks a thumb over his shoulder toward Aedan and says, “This one’s with me, before you decide to kick his ass too.”

“I guessed as much when he didn’t shoot you, too,” she says, and waves toward herself. “Come on. No time for chit-chat.”

Juno takes the stairs two at a time, sliding off his knuckledusters and stowing them as he goes, and hears Aedan come after him. “Ground teams?” he asks, when he reaches the top.

“Assaulting other exits,” Buddy says, already walking toward the stands—inside the arena, there’s the noise of a commotion beginning to filter through. “We assumed you could handle yourself.”

“Came to check on me anyway,” Juno points out.

Buddy sends a chiding look over her shoulder as they dart through a doorway and out into the seating for the arena. “Of course,” she says, and then they’re out in the open air.

The stadium is open from above; everything built in the Guardian Angel era was. The stands ring the floor of the stadium above and below them; they’re near the middle, height-wise, and the floor of the stadium itself is sunk further still, making the space seem very deep despite it not rising high off the ground. Around them, chaos reigns. Juno looks down to see the civilians that had come in—less than a thousand, he thinks—beginning to panic and flee out through the doors. Some of the other entrances have smoke billowing through them, and there are hovercars and bikes above, some chasing others around. Blaster fire is being exchanged all around, and Juno, Buddy, and Aedan all duck for cover behind a row of seats, then keep low as they move along toward the far end of the oval.

Down on the floor, far below them, the stadium floor is a mess of laser fire. Juno squints through smoke and movement to discern that constables are fighting a rapidly losing battle with a massive wave of Rebellion fighters who seem to have come in through ground-floor entrances *and* from on high and rappelled or been transported on vehicles down to the stadium floor. From this far away, and with the stage itself particularly chaotic, Juno can’t tell what’s happened to Kasim, the firing squad who would have been on the stage with him, or Ophion. He can only hope that the rebel made it out alright, as Peter had.

“Where are we going?” Juno says to Buddy as they creep further along.

“Closer,” Buddy says. “We’re on extraction duty.”

“Alright.”

They make their way through the stands, staying low and moving quickly to avoid as much notice as possible. All the constables are lower down, trying to corral the civilians or heading for the stadium floor to put a stop to the firefight there. Once they’ve come most of the way around, Buddy ducks back out into the hall, to a place where a hole has been blown in the roof of the stadium’s outer ring. A rope ladder hangs down through the hole, and she climbs up it quickly, her hands steady and sure. Aedan looks a little leery, so Juno says, “I’ll hold the bottom stable.”

Aedan nods, and once Juno has a grasp on the ladder, he climbs up as well, not as quickly as Buddy but with an easy strength. Juno follows as soon as he’s up and out, and a minute later finds himself standing beside a hovercar parked on the roof. It has Enforcement markings, but there are no constables around—must be stolen. Maybe even the one Vespa and Ms. Marshall took when they made their escape.

“Pull the ladder up!” Buddy calls, already heading for the car. “Then come get cozy, boys.”

“Got it.” Juno reaches down and pulls the ladder up, hand-over-hand, leaving it in a coiled pile beside the hole. Aedan has already gone over and gotten in the car when Juno gets there, and has set himself by the front passenger-side window, his rifle off his back and ready.

“Going to play gunner?” Juno asks, sliding into the back. As soon as he’s in and the door is shut, Buddy takes off and aims the car down toward the stadium floor, flicking on the lights on the roof. The other Enforcement cars in the air let them go past, and Aedan leans out the window and sights down the rifle without a word; his intention is perfectly clear. Juno would join him, but his long-range shooting hasn’t improved *that* much, especially with an unfamiliar weapon, though he’s recovered his accuracy at short and medium ranges even without his eye. Still, he unslings his own rifle from his shoulder and checks it, ready to make use of it once they hit the ground.

Landing is a little hairy—blaster fire flying everywhere. Aedan takes a few shots to clear them a little space, and Rebellion fighters scatter out from beneath them as they land. They’ve landed close to the stage, and there’s a knot of fighting surrounding the set-up stand meant for Kasim’s execution. He piles out the back door immediately, only giving a brief wave in response to Buddy’s shouted, “Find Vespa and get back here!” before bringing his rifle to his shoulder and shooting a

constable in the shoulder. These rifles don't have a stun setting; a shot to the chest or the head will be lethal.

Aedan has less compunction, or maybe just too much ingrained instinct. His shots take constables in the chest, the gut, and even the head a few times. They quickly clear the field between them and the stage, and once there's room to run Juno discards his rifle and reaches for his smaller blaster. "We're moving in!" he calls to Aedan, who nods and drops his own rifle. They can't risk missing and hitting a rebel when the fighting is as close as it is around the stage.

As it is, Juno almost considers dropping his gun entirely once they get into the fray. People are taking potshots at close range, and he'd almost be better served just to wade in and start hitting people, let Aedan cover him. Not yet, though—he needs a better grasp of the situation, and he watches closely as they move in, taking out the constables on the edges of the stage as they close the distance.

From what he can tell, some sort of business went down on the stage itself, and constables converged there from all around, and then rebels converged on them, and then more constables. There are layers of fighting, people shooting one another, some wielding knives or knuckledusters like Juno's. Those shooting are missing more than they're hitting, because trying to aim at anyone means aiming very close to an ally, and they're all playing it safe. Juno has enough confidence in his aim that he takes a few shots from the outside, and Aedan does the same, but once they press past the first layer of constables surrounding the stage, Juno holsters his gun again. Aedan keeps his out, shooting to stun—but then, the rebels are only tenuously his allies; he's less concerned about friendly fire than most others.

Closer to the stage, the fight turns rapidly into a melee. Juno hadn't been aware that the Rebellion had such a large force available to them, but there are several dozen fighters from both sides embroiled in the brawl, some blaster bolts flying but mostly people going at each other with fists and blades. Juno deflects a constable's trench knife with the steel knuckledusters he's wearing, sending sparks flying, and then breaks the guy's nose for the pleasure; he follows with a swift kick in the ribs that will hopefully keep him down for a while. The next guy he clotheslines with an arm, sending him tumbling directly into Aedan's line of fire, and then he disarms a woman about to stab a Rebellion member in the back.

Arms go around his throat as someone jumps onto his back from on

high—a constable off the stage. Juno stumbles back, reaching up to grab at the choking limb wrapped around him, and he loses his balance, falling to the ground. He lands on top of the constable, hears the air go out of their lungs. The shock is enough to loosen their grip and he rolls away, regaining his feet, and finds himself facing a young man whose fists are up, knuckles bloodied. He grins, savage, and says, "Come at me, traitor scum."

"I'd rather not," Juno says, but he doesn't have much choice; the constable rushes him. They exchange a swift series of blows, Juno's old boxing training put to the test, and then he ducks and manages to kick out and land a blow on his opponent's knee. The constable staggers, his hands drop—Juno hits him with a left hook across the jaw, not hard enough to break the bone.

"Fuck," the constable says, stepping back and getting his guard up again. He pauses to spit a gob of bloody saliva out, and then comes at Juno again.

"This is stupid," Juno grunts, as the constable hammers at his forearms and ribs. "Give up."

"Fuck you," the other guy replies, blood in his teeth.

"I've got someone for that," Juno replies, feints right, and then hits the guy squarely across the face when he falls for it. He feels the crunch even through the metal of knuckledusters, and winces a little; that's a broken cheekbone, if he had to guess. At least the guy collapses to the ground, and Juno lets out a hard breath, standing over him. The constable is young, not much older than the kid who'd been in Juno's guard squad, but… he's wearing a wedding ring, gleaming silver marred by blood. "If you want to make it home to your own someone, you'll stay down," he tells the guy, and makes again for the stage.

On the stage, there's not so much fighting as there is a standoff going on. There's a knot of constables guarding—fuck, Ophion's body, sprawled on the ground. Juno can't see him well, but he'd recognize the garish uniform of office anywhere, and he can see the spreading pool of blood well enough. Either the man's dead, or he's about to be.

Other constables are trying to break the Rebellion line surrounding the stage, shooting down into the crowd or making physical assaults like the one made on Juno just a minute ago. It's confusing; he's struggling a little to track movement through the crowd as people

push back and forth, the constables trying to break through to their fallen leader and the Rebels making every effort to prevent them.

The Rebellion members on the stage have guns pointed at the constables, and off to the side others are guarding approaches from both ground and sky, keeping vehicles and other constables away. Among those protecting the flanks, Juno spots Vespa's shock of green hair, and heads her way, keeping a wary eye out as he moves for blaster fire that could easily be lethal.

She spots him quickly, and with a gesture another member of the Rebellion clears the way for him so that he can shift to her side. Somewhere along the way, he's lost Aedan, but he doesn't have time to worry about that right now.

"Buddy's waiting," he says to her, as soon as he's at her side.

Vespa nods, throws one of the slender knives in her hands into the eye of a constable trying to make their way up the stairs, and says, "Let's go."

"Any others?" he asks, and she nods again, leading him further back along the stage, toward a huddle of people in the mismatched dark clothing that forms the Rebellion's loose uniform. Several of the people there are looking outward, weapons ready, in case a constable comes at them, and Juno can see their faces marked with burgundy paint.

"Extraction?" one of them asks as Juno and Vespa draw close, and Vespa gives a swift nod. The rebels in front of them part slightly, making space for Kasim—bruised around the eyes, bleeding from a cut on his head and looking slightly dazed, but alive—to push through.

"Come on," Vespa says, and transfers all three of her remaining knives into one hand so that she can take Kasim's wrist and lead him through the crowd. "Head down, kid."

"Not a kid," Kasim mutters in a put-upon tone.

"You're twenty years my junior," Vespa replies, "that makes you a kid. Now come on."

"What about Eshe and… all this?" Juno asks, gesturing.

"Buddy's on cleanup," Vespa says.

“But she—”

“Shut up,” Vespa snaps, and then shoves Kasim hard, out of the way of a shot. Kasim falls, off-balance, and Juno goes after him to shield him, just in case; fortunately no further shots follow the first one.

“We’d better hurry,” Juno says grimly, and hauls Kasim back to his feet before wrapping an arm around his shoulders—not particularly easy, Kasim is Juno’s own height, but broader—and does his best to shield him.

“No shit,” Vespa says. She turns back toward the stairway she’d been guarding, asks, “Which way?”

Juno points straight back in the direction of the car that had brought him, Buddy, and Aedan down. She nods, and immediately throws herself off the stage and onto the back of a constable, blades sinking into flesh; a more effective version of the attack that had sent Juno stumbling earlier.

Vespa’s not exactly big, but she fights like a dervish, and with some support from other Rebellion fighters, she clears a path for them. Juno keeps himself covering Kasim’s back, hustling their pace, and draws his gun again; chance of friendly fire or no, if he sees a weapon pointed at them, he shoots it. Three, four, five constables take stun blasts to the chest from him, one Rebel barely ducks a missed shot, six —fuck. Juno recoils from the sting as a high-powered laser blast glances past his arm. Where—

He moves without thinking, shoves Kasim down and takes the bolt in the chest. It feels like lightning lancing through him, like it’s going to stop his heart. Juno staggers back, his hand reaching up to touch—the scorched fabric of his shirt, and below that, the vest. His head is spinning, the breath gone, but he’s alive.

The constable aiming at him and Kasim is readying another shot.

The next moment, the fucker goes down with a smoking hole in the side of his head. Juno looks, startled, to the side. Aedan stands there, his rifle held steady to his shoulder, though when he looks back his face is pale.

“Caught up, have you?” Juno calls to him, his voice a bit breathless from the impact. He won’t be able to take another shot like that; a blaster rifle set to kill will compromise armour in one go, and he’s lucky it didn’t penetrate. Apparently Brahmese Enforcement has better

gear than the HCPD did.

“Looked like you needed some help,” Aedan calls back, and takes another shot. “Hurry the fuck up.”

“Thanks.” Juno reaches down, hauls Kasim up again—he looks even more rattled. He probably took a blow to the head at some point, or he might be drugged. His footsteps are heavy and dragging, and he seems to be having difficulty focusing on where he’s placing his feet, so Juno decides on drugged and slings an arm around Kasim again, guiding him through the mess and madness surrounding them.

With a blaster in one hand and Kasim in the other, it’s a struggle to push through, following Vespa, but she stays close and Aedan keeps watch on Juno’s back, taking out constables who seem about to make an attempt with lethal aim. It feels like an hour but is probably only a few minutes to get to the car, and standing by it, dressed in a—surely stolen—Enforcement overcoat with Captain’s strikes is Jet. He raises a hand to them, waving them all calmly into the car, and Juno has never been so glad to see the big guy in his life. He scoots close and piles Kasim into the back seat with Vespa and Jet watching his back, makes sure all Kasim’s limbs are inside, and then shuts the door with a sigh of relief—the glass is treated to reflect blasterfire, so Kasim is safe now. Juno just needs to keep his own head on and they’ll be fine.

“We’re good!” Juno calls, scooting around to the other side of the car—there aren’t any constables watching them that he can see, all occupied with the melee surrounding the stage, and that grants them a window of opportunity.

“Excellent,” Jet says, climbing into the driver’s side; his legs are a bit too long for the seat, and he adjusts it swiftly, settling in behind the wheel like he was born to it, as he always does. Juno’s sure he’d prefer the Ruby, but she’s a bit ostentatious for this sort of thing. Vespa slides over the hood to climb into the front passenger seat, so Juno skirts around to climb in behind her. Before he does, though, he looks over the top of the car to meet Aedan’s eyes, who’s still lingering on the edge of the crowd, watching their retreat.

“I need to go,” he calls.

Aedan looks back, steady, and says, “I hope I’ll see you again someday, Juno Steel.”

“And you, Aedan…”

He quirks a smile. “King.” A salute, and he vanishes back into the crowd.

King. It rings a bell, Juno thinks, sliding into the car. It’s only once they’ve taken off and are sliding smoothly between Enforcement cars above that he remembers: one of Ms. Marshall’s associates had been an Eron King, suspected of Rebellion involvement. Their name had been flagged with a marker that indicated that they were a New Kinshasan exile. Maybe Aedan was related.

Juno shakes his head, drawing a hazy look from Kasim. “Nothing,” he says, and leans over to inspect Kasim more closely. “They give you something?”

“Mhm,” Kasim replies. “Uh—painkiller. So I could stand. Pretty heavy-duty.”

“Guess you’re not feeling too bad right now, then,” Juno says, and without prompting from Vespa takes Kasim’s wrist and starts counting his pulse.

“Oh, I feel like shit,” Kasim says, “but I could stand.”

“Well, you don’t have to. We’re taking you home.”

“To ‘Bram?”

Juno shoots a look askance toward the front seat, where Vespa has twisted to watch them. She says, “He’ll be waiting. Sleep if you can.”

“‘Kay.” Kasim leans back, lets his head tip against the headrest, and closes his eyes. His pulse stays the same—slow and steady—and his breathing doesn’t change, so Juno thinks he might still be awake, but he’s checked out. Quietly, Juno reports his BPM to Vespa, and she nods and purses her lips.

“He going to be okay?” Juno asks softly.

“He’ll be fine,” she says.

“Ophion?”

“Dead.”

“Couldn’t have happened to a nicer piece of shit,” Juno sighs, leaning back himself. “Who got him?”

“Eshe.”

Juno nods. That had been the plan, more or less. “She get away?”

“Yeah.” Vespa twists further to fix Juno a glare. “You injured?”

“No—uh, wait.” In the rush, the adrenaline of the escape and of nearly being shot to death, Juno had forgotten the glancing shot to his arm. “Yeah—got winged.” He brings a hand up to check; the wound is cauterized, as he’d expect, but it stings like a bitch when he touches it. “Took one to the chest, too, but the vest caught it.”

“Wrist.”

Without arguing, Juno offers his wrist, lets Vespa check for arrhythmia. After a minute, she grunts, apparently satisfied, and says, “You’re not going to drop dead.”

“Good to know.” Juno smiles up at the roof of the car. “We did it, huh?”

“The work that remains is not for us,” Jet says, in an agreeable sort of tone. “Only one thing is left to be settled.”

“Which is?” Juno asks to the ceiling.

“Peter is at Enforcement Headquarters completing an infiltration.”

Juno sits bolt upright, launching himself forward so quickly that he nearly smacks his head on the back of Vespa’s seat. “*What?*”

“For the same reason we did not tell him that you would be present at the execution, we did not tell you about his part in the plan,” Jet says, sounding as if this is supposed to be very reasonable. “As expected, you are concerned. You need not be. I have already heard from Rita that all went to plan on their end, and the Headquarters is officially under Rebellion control. Peter will be waiting for you.”

“You—”

“We did it for your own good, idiot,” Vespa says. “You and him both would’ve just been distracted with worry. Now sit the fuck down and relax. We’re playing significant other delivery service, so we’ll take you to your boyfriend and then this one to his.”

Kasim is smiling very vaguely when Juno glances at him, confirming that he’s not actually sleeping.

Juno considers getting mad, realizes that against Vespa and Jet he's not going to get anywhere and Vespa might decide to stab him somewhere non-vital for backtalk, and subsides. At least it's not too far a ride to Headquarters, and in an Enforcement vehicle they're not going to be stopped for any reason. He'll be back with Peter soon, and can confirm for himself, *finally*, that his lover is alright.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> This is the chapter with the smut in it, finally. Only took, what, 30k to get here?

Enforcement Headquarters falls embarrassingly easy. They're dependent on their computers, and with Rita on the inside and Peter… well, also on the inside, it's not hard to pick apart their defences, crash the system, and make quick work of locking the few remaining armed constables into cells. Most of the techs, medics, and pilots—the non-combatants—surrender quickly and are left under the supervision of armed members of the Rebellion, and those who don't join the constables in the cells. Very few people have to die, though Peter turns a blind eye to those members of the Rebellion who get a little trigger happy when herding the constables toward the detention block. It's not like their fury isn't justified.

Peter isn't much one for command, so once the Headquarters are secured, he leaves his people to it, letting them settle in at computer terminals and begin the work of dismantling Enforcement's surveillance as effectively as possible. Others work on finding lists of civilians who have been quietly executed, and still others on figuring out who is under arrest and in prison. It will be the work of weeks; he has no real intention of being part of it.

His own task is more personal. He's been tasked with reunion: specifically, the public and emotionally manipulative reunion of Jason with his wife—Mag's idea, of course, but the benefits had outweighed the distastefulness. Once the situation in the control room is more or less under control, he slips off toward the living quarters—currently under lockdown—to find Cassandra Thalas. The comm in his ear pings as he draws close to the doors holding the area closed off, and he reaches up to tap off the mute.

"Mistah Nureyev!" Rita trills into his ear, sounding enthused. "I'm so so so glad you're alright! You looked very dashing just now on the video feed you know, all like, *stab*, and *pow*, and kicking that one guy in the face like that! Really showed them how it's done. And we're all good here now, we've got—"

"Thank you, Rita," Peter says, and tries to tamp down the obvious impatience in his voice before he continues. "Can you open the

residential wing for me?"

"Oh, yeah, of course! Comin' right up, one open door, no problemo." There's the faint sound of rapid typing; Rita does have the tendency to hammer on the keys. "Aaaaaaand GOT IT! You should be good to go."

Peter rounds the corner to find that the main corridor to the residential wing is indeed opening: the large blast door is rising, a green light blinking on high. Just above, embedded into the ceiling in the right hand corner, there's a small black dot that he recognizes as a security camera, and he nods toward it, assuming that Rita is monitoring him on the feed. "Thank you, Miss Rita."

"Not a problem at all, like I said!" she says. "You gonna bring Mrs. Thalas back this way to her hubby and all that? It's so *romantic*, Mistah Nureyev, I swear, just like something from a stream! Two lovers, parted by a war, one a captive who sympathizes with the enemy and the other the child of the leader of one faction… wow! Really dramatic, y'know? So cool… And Mrs. Thalas is *so* pretty, and her husband is *so* handsome! They really look like movie stars!"

"They do," Peter agrees, only half-listening to the tirade. The halls here are bland and confusing, without even as much marking to help find the way as the tunnels the Rebellion lives in, and he has to pause and pull out his comms unit to pull up the map Rita had gotten out to them.

"Oh, I can guide you Mistah Nureyev!" Rita says, and begins directing him—with intermixed commentary, of course, but her directions are clear enough and he makes his way quickly through the halls of the residential area until he comes to yet *another* nondescript door and she says, "Here she is! Go ahead and knock, she knows you're coming!"

"Thank you," Peter says, and knocks, hoping.

The voice that calls from within is high and clear, unfamiliar. "Is it over?"

"It is," Peter calls back, and after a moment the door slides open to reveal a stunningly beautiful woman; as Rita had said, she looks like the star of some romantic stream, with wide eyes and delicate features, her silky black hair falling around her in perfect waves. She's also glowing with her obvious and advanced pregnancy, and Peter can understand how Jason is so very devoted. Such effortless beauty is all he himself aspires to, some days. "Cassandra Thalas?"

“Yes,” she says, staring at him. “You’re the Angel.”

“I… well, yes,” Peter says. “So they tell me, anyway.”

Suddenly, she smiles. “I suppose I should have said, you’re *Juno’s* Angel. He’s told me about you, a little.”

“Ah,” Peter says, and tries to hide that he feels a little like he’s been hit with a plank of wood. *Juno*. “Right. His messages indicated he’d make contact with you.”

“I would like to think we’ve become friends,” Cassandra says demurely, and steps back from the door. “Would you like to come in?”

“Actually,” Peter says, clearing his throat. “I’ve come to take you away, if that’s quite alright. There’s someone waiting in the command hub who’d very much like to see you.”

Immediately, Cassandra’s eyes go wide. “I—oh. Okay.” He can see her making conscious effort not to ask the obvious question; it’s blatant in the way she bites her lip and closes her eyes for a moment, takes a slow, steadying breath. Then she says, “I need a moment to grab shoes and a sweater.”

“Of course. I’ll wait.”

Cassandra steps back inside, but cues the door to remain open, giving Peter a glimpse into her quarters—homey, though not obviously wealthy in the way he might have expected from one of the most highly ranked members of society, a lingering scion of New Kinshasa. She treads back into a side room and returns a minute later wearing simple flats and a cardigan, hanging unbuttoned around her belly. When she returns to the door, she steps through and lets it close behind her, and then, placing a hand on her stomach, looks up at Peter and says, “Shall we?”

Peter smiles and offers her his arm. “Allow me to lead the way, my lady.”

She giggles as she takes it, leaning a little bit against his side. Her steps are encumbered by the weight of the baby she carries, but there’s still a grace to her, especially in the soft settling of her fingers at the crook of his elbow. “So dashing. You must have charmed Juno right off his feet.”

“I certainly tried.” Peter clears this throat again. “Do you… happen to

know where Juno's quarters are?"

"Oh, yes," she says, looking up, surprised. "Though he's not there."

"He's not?" Peter closes his teeth on a demand for more information, says, "I assumed he'd be bunkering down, since he wasn't in amongst the… well, fighting."

"No, he was assigned as a guard in the squadron sent to the execution," Cassandra says, as if this isn't information fit to unsettle Peter entirely. She's still looking at him, with a steady, compassionate look that makes him think she knows. "I thought you would know."

Peter shakes his head, numb. "No one said. I—right." Put it away. For later. For when Juno is back safe in his arms, as he *will* be. "Well. Thank you for letting me know."

"Peter." His name on unfamiliar lips draws sharp attention, even after months living in a place where everyone knows him. No one calls him that. She's still looking at him, looking *through* him; her and Jason are well matched indeed. "He will be fine. He's very strong, your lady."

"I know," he says roughly. "You know, your husband said the same to me about you."

She makes a small noise. "You met him?"

"We spent a good amount of time together, in fact," Peter says. "He was a prisoner, but not restricted from contact—we treated him well, I swear. We became friends, I would like to think." He smiles a little. "Probably for the same reason you and Juno were companions: both of us were missing someone, very much."

"Ah," Cassandra sighs, and leans a little closer to Peter, as if she can absorb some of Jason's presence by proxy.

Peter just pats her hand. He could tell her that she'll see him soon, but he suspects she knows. It's not far from her quarters back to the command hub, though the walk takes longer than it had taken him on his own; Cassandra's pace is limited by both her pregnancy and her shorter legs, though she makes an admirable effort. Still, Peter doesn't allow her to rush, knowing that she should be taking it easy.

A ten minute walk becomes five becomes two, and then right outside the door Peter pauses and pulls Cassandra to a stop with him. He can feel her hand trembling against his arm. Carefully, he takes it in his

own and turns to face her, gripping her fingers securely, and looks down into her eyes. She looks back, dark-eyed and steady, and smiles tremulously up at him. “I know,” she says, very softly. Her voice is nearly a whisper. “I will be alright, Peter, though your concern is appreciated.”

“Try to keep in mind the effect it will have if you faint,” Peter advises her, and then reaches behind himself and pushes the button to open the door, then steps back and out of the way to watch.

Jason has clearly been warned of what was coming, because he’s standing in the middle of the room, spine bolt-straight and his whole body nearly vibrating with anticipatory tension. His fists are clenched at his sides, but the second Peter moves out of the way, it all just… goes out of him.

Cassandra crosses the room, her eyes fixed on Jason as if no one else in the world exists, though there are dozens of people watching them, and finally comes to stand directly in front of her husband, who’s been in captivity for many long months, most of which she believed him dead. It’s hard to watch, almost, but Peter can’t tear his eyes away.

It’s not Cassandra who collapses, almost to Peter’s surprise. He knows how nervous she was, how tense. Instead, it’s Jason who falls to his knees and reaches out for his wife like a supplicant at an altar, and when she steps into his embrace, the sound he makes as he pulls her close and presses his face to her round belly is that of a man driven to the edge and pulled back only by the narrowest of margins.

“Shh,” Cassandra says, and wraps her arms around him in return, sheltering his head and holding him to her. “Shh, my love. I’m safe now.” Peter can hear the tears in her voice. “It’s over.”

“Thank the gods,” Jason says, his voice muffled. Even obscured as his face is, Peter can hear how wrecked his voice is. “Cassandra. *Cassandra.*”

“My father is dead,” Cassandra says, and looks over her shoulder at Peter who nods in confirmation—he’d gotten word of that as their own attack was finishing. “Our child will grow up in peace.”

At that, Jason surges back to his feet and bends to capture Cassandra’s lips in a kiss, tender and joyful. She presses up toward him, her face upturned like a flower to the sun, and when they part after an endless minute Jason looks past her at Peter. “Thank you,” he says, and then simply curls down to bury his face in Cassandra’s shoulder, letting her

comfort him.

“It was my pleasure,” Peter says, as purely honest as perhaps anything he’s ever said in his life, and as the room erupts into applause and cheering, Rebellion members and former Enforcement personnel alike, Peter slips away. He can’t bear to watch a moment longer, feels something desperate crawling in and making a home under his skin, and he won’t be in the room with all those people while it happens.

In his ear, Rita says, “From the comms chatter I’m picking it up sounds like things are gonna be a wrap over at the stadium pretty soon, Mistah Nureyev! If you wanted to go to mine and the boss’s rooms I can make sure he finds you there when he gets here, since I reckon he’ll probably wanna come find you right away as soon as he can!”

“Perfect,” Peter says, his voice coming out startlingly hoarse. He clears his throat again, then in silence follows Rita’s directions to the quarters she and Juno had shared.

Once the door is closed behind him and Peter is staring around at the small detritus of Juno and Rita’s cohabitation, she says, more quietly, “I’ll leave you to it, Mistah Nureyev. Do you want me to let you know when Mistah Steel is almost here?”

“No,” Peter says, “that’s fine. I will wait.” And he will. No matter how long it takes.

Rita makes an affirmative noise, and then there’s a soft click as the comms go dead. Peter plucks the device out of his head and discards it haphazardly on the desk in the main room, which from the crumbs and the plugged-in charging cord he assumes Rita must use as a computer desk. Right now, of course, her laptop is with her, but he can easily picture her sitting here working to encrypt or decrypt messages passed between her and Buddy. And he can imagine Juno sitting on the small couch, listening to the radio or reading something on his comms, or puttering around in the kitchen making coffee, or—

Peter turns his mind away and wanders into the hall. There’s a small washroom unit and two bedrooms, one of which has its door closed and the other open. The open door is to a room obviously belonging to Rita, if the belongings sprawling out of the bag in the corner are anything to go by. She doesn’t seem to have unpacked or settled in. He wonders if Juno has done the same, and has to stand outside Juno’s door for a good five minutes before he’s able to force himself to

raise his hand and open it.

The first step inside is nearly overwhelming. Even impersonal as it is—and unlike Rita, Juno *has* put his belongings away, leaving very little that's personal out—the room *smells* like Juno, and Peter has to just… be still and breathe it in. He wants to… he wants so many things. It's too much. He turns around and leaves the room, goes to sit on the couch and lets the part of his mind that keeps track of passing time turn off.

It could be ten minutes or four hours before something changes. To his right, the door slides open, and Peter turns to look. The breath leaves him all at once, because Juno, *Juno* is standing there, a little scorched and bloodied around the edges and disheveled in the way he gets after a fight, but *there*, in the flesh and within reach for the first time in *months*.

"Juno," he says, and all of that, *everything,* is in the way he says Juno's name. He can't hide it anymore.

"Peter," Juno says, warm like an embrace, and strides across the room to touch, finally. His hands around Peter's arms, pulling him up, bringing him close—and then Juno's lips are on his and Peter hands it all over, all of the everything that had been in his voice, on his tongue. When their mouths meet is passes between them and Peter just *folds*, folds into Juno, wraps his arms around him and clings with all the desperation he's been pretending he hasn't felt for all this time. Juno's lips are searingly hot against his own, and they part only for a second to gasp for air before they're pressing together once more, hungry.

Juno shoves, and Peter topples backward, falling back to sit on the couch. He only has a second to make a bereft noise and then Juno's on him, climbing into his lap and shoving him back against the couch cushions, kissing him breathless. Peter moans shamelessly into Juno's mouth, clutching at his back, and lets Juno absolutely devour him, opening to his kiss and giving in to the demand that Juno has wordlessly presented. Months of deprivation are making themselves all known at once, and Peter arches up, helpless.

After a moment, Juno draws back, down, to press lips and then teeth to Peter's jaw, biting and sucking until he's sure to leave a livid mark where it will be most visible. "Missed me?" he asks, almost laughing.

"Yes, *yes*," Peter says. "So much, Juno."

“I’m here now. I’ve got you.” Another kiss, another bruise, further down Peter’s throat this time; Juno is leaving a little trail of marks like gems dropped against Peter’s skin, precious and invaluable. “What —”

“All I want is you,” Peter interrupts, because he doesn’t *care*. Every minute of his time on Brahma has been a fucking nightmare, from the moment they arrived and Peter came face-to-face with Mag like something out of his darkest dreams, to the empty minutes before Juno walked through the door just now, and he doesn’t want to *think* any more. “All I want is to be with you.”

“Okay,” Juno says, gentles, presses a softer kiss to Peter’s collarbone and then reaches down to the hem of his shirt. “Arms, sweetheart.”

Peter leans back as little as he possibly can while still giving Juno room to maneuver and lets go only long enough for Juno to pull his shirt over his head, and then he grabs on again, one hand wrapping around the back of Juno’s neck and the other around his upper arm.

At the touch on his arm, Juno hisses, and Peter immediately jerks his hand away. “Juno?”

“It’s alright,” Juno says, and shrugs off his coat to reveal a narrow scorch mark on his bicep—someone had winged him with a blaster. “Mild burn. Vespa said it would be fine.”

“I hurt you.” Peter’s fingers hover, and he can’t decide—he wants, *needs* to touch, but he can’t bear to hurt Juno again.

“It’s fine.” Juno leans in, kisses Peter again, and reaches up with one hand to tangle their fingers together. Peter holds hard, and hell, that probably hurts too, but he can’t let go. Not yet.

When Juno pulls away again, it’s to say, “I have a bed, you know.”

“Right.”

Juno pulls back, away from Peter, and stands, but he doesn’t go far; he must know that while Peter managed to let go of his hand, Peter will probably die if Juno takes more than that single step away. Juno stays there, standing between Peter’s spread knees, to strip off the laser proof vest he’s wearing and the shirt underneath it, and then he reaches down to offer Peter a hand up. Peter takes it, and Juno, with easy strength, pulls him to stand too, both of them deeply in each other’s space. Peter bends down, captivated, and lets his lips slide

along Juno's cheekbone, then his chin, and finally to his lips, and they kiss again for a long time, Juno's hands resting easy and confident on Peter's hips while Peter clings to his shoulders.

Finally, Juno draws back—his lips stay close, brushing Peter's, and he says into that miniscule non-space between them, "Bed?"

"Right," Peter says again, inanely. He feels rather like his whole mind has melted out his ears, and he's very much okay with that. "After you, my love."

Juno snorts. "Sap. Come on." He takes Peter's wrist in his hand, strong fingers wrapping warm and tight around the delicate joint—more delicate now, Peter knows; he's lost weight. Peter follows the gentle tug, because he can't imagine doing anything else.

Juno seems so relaxed, so calm and collected, that it's a surprise when he turns around in the hallway and pulls Peter down into another kiss, suddenly impatient.

"Juno?" Peter gasps, when they part for breath.

"Just… fuck. Missed you."

"Me too." Peter kisses Juno's cheek, his jaw, much like Juno had kissed him earlier. "I want—"

"Up," Juno demands, and his hands on Peter's thighs are enough to know what he wants. Peter hops a little, bringing his legs up to wrap around Juno's waist and his arms around Juno's shoulders, as Juno lifts him with deceptive ease, the muscles in his arms tense and defined. He twists and presses Peter into the wall of the hallway, braces him there and bites his collarbone, sharp.

"Fuck," Peter hisses, and lets his head fall back to crack against the wall—it doesn't matter, he barely feels the impact. All he feels is Juno's mouth on him, his teeth, his pressing between Peter's thighs and rubbing their bodies together. He realizes, abruptly, that he's hard—that they both are. He hadn't even thought of it, too absorbed in Juno. It's been so long.

"Good," Juno murmurs against his chest, and shifts his hips. It's *overwhelming*, the surge of heat that fills Peter up from the pit of his belly to the back of his throat, and he moans.

"Fuck me," he says, before he can think to stifle the words. Juno just

groans, so he keeps going, no need for a filter here, no need for a mask or a masquerade. “Juno, please, please fuck me, I need you, I want you *in me*.”

“I don’t have—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Peter says, and bows his head to press his face into Juno’s hair, moaning again at the second, third, fourth shift of Juno’s hips, until they’re rutting together in the slightest of movements, propped against the wall. Juno doesn’t have the leverage to properly *thrust* without risking dropping Peter, and Peter’s too—he’s too everything to focus. He can only feel it.

“I’m not going to fuck you dry,” Juno says, but he does rebalance Peter against his body so that he can free one hand; one of his thighs presses in closer under Peter to support him and it presses against his cock, and he arches hard enough that Juno almost *does* drop him. “Stay still.”

Not possible, but Peter does his best, trembling as Juno yanks open his pants, sending the button flying. He reaches in and wraps his hand around Peter’s cock; Peter makes a slightly pitiful noise, and then sighs into it, clenches his legs tighter around Juno’s waist. Juno pulls Peter’s cock out, shoving fabric out of the way, and then licks his palm before giving him a few quick, rough strokes, enough to make Peter arch again—this time, Juno manages to keep his balance, and squeezes around the head of his cock.

“N-not going to last long,” Peter gasps, swallowing hard. “I—please, Juno, it’s—”

“It’s okay,” Juno says. His voice has gone low and hoarse in the way it does when he’s almost more aroused than he can stand, and he strokes Peter again, stoking that fire inside. “Did you wait for me?”

“I—I thought of you, a few times. But—” Juno’s thumb catches under the head of Peter’s cock and he has to break off to moan.

“Me too,” Juno says, a soft reassurance, and he presses in closer in order to kiss Peter’s jaw, his hand trapped between their bodies. “Come on, Peter.”

His name in Juno’s voice, those short, hard strokes in the hot space between them—Peter comes right up to the edge of orgasm. He makes a desperate noise, and Juno bites down on his jaw, and that’s *it*, he’s toppling over the edge, coming wet and messy between them. Juno

catches the mess in his hand and holds Peter pressed tight against the wall until he slumps, breathing hard. Then he gingerly lets Peter down, relaxing his grip on the back of Peter's thigh—which had been so hard that Peter suspects he'll have bruises; he's rather looking forward to it.

His legs feel shaky beneath him, but they hold him. "Okay?" Juno asks, drawing back.

"I… yes," Peter says. He feels a bit dazed, but the release has done the desperate, near-anxious tension in him a great deal of good. "Very okay. You?"

"Well," Juno says, and casts a sardonic eye down toward his pants, which are still impressively tented.

"Right," Peter says, and smiles, wide and sharp. "Can I help you with that?"

"Oh, you'd better," Juno says, and surges forward to steal a kiss. "Bedroom. I want to fuck your thighs."

"*Oh.*" Peter slides out from between Juno and the wall, and says, "Yes, please."

Juno just *smiles*, smug and a little predatory in the way he gets on very rare occasion, and Peter is extremely happy to oblige Juno's mood. He turns and heads for the bedroom, the one he'd found before that he knows belongs to Juno, and barely makes it through the door before Juno is plastered to his back, one hand—the messy one—held out to the side and the other gripping his hip. He kisses the back of Peter's neck, his shoulder, his shoulder blade—even just on the other side of orgasm the touch sends a shiver down his spine, and he can't help but think about the other places Juno might decide to put his mouth.

"Bed," Juno says, his mouth pressed against Peter's spine, and then shoves him gently. "Clothes off."

"Yes, my dear," Peter murmurs. He's more than half out of his clothes already; it's the work of seconds to kick off shoes and pants, then sit down to remove his socks. On other days he might put on a show, but he can tell Juno doesn't want that, and he doesn't have the patience either. Once he's naked, he lies down on the bed, sprawled on his back, and waits.

In the time he took to strip, Juno has done the same, and is only a few seconds behind, hampered by the need to wipe the mess off his hand with a tissue from the bedside drawer. But as soon as he's done with that, and has retrieved a frankly miniscule tube of lube, he's after Peter, crawling onto the bed to straddle his waist and lean down to kiss him.

"Are you sure you don't want to fuck me properly?" Peter asks on a gasp, when Juno lets him come up for air.

"Too impatient," Juno declares, then swings one leg over and lies down beside Peter, shoving at his hip to make him roll over onto his side. Peter considers rolling onto his front, trying to tempt Juno into opening him up, but the temptation of what Juno is offering—of being in Juno's arms, letting himself take comfort while Juno takes his own pleasure in him at his own pace—is more than enough.

At a nudge, Peter raises one leg and lets Juno smear lube there—it's a bit chilly, and he shivers, prompting an apologetic kiss to his shoulder. Then Juno is slotting in close behind him, his cock sliding against Peter's thigh, and he closes his legs tightly. Juno sighs out a breath against his back, tucking himself in as close as he can, reaching over Peter's body with one arm to hold him closer. He's a wall of heat at Peter's back, and Peter leans happily back into him, relishing the warmth. Juno's cock lies heavy and hot between Peter's thighs, and he squeezes a little tighter, pressing back into the cradle of Juno's hips.

Juno lets out a soft sound against Peter's skin, then thrusts a few times, short and hard, not wasting time. The head of his cock nudges against Peter's balls, and Peter reaches down to lace his fingers into Juno's. Juno squeezes his hand, slows his thrusts a little, though the movements stay short—he's not willing to pull back any further than is necessary to get the stimulation he needs, but it's enough. Peter can feel the building tension in him as he works himself to a climax and pushes back, gives Juno everything. He holds his legs tense for Juno, but the rest of his body is relaxed, and he leans back against Juno's chest. The only thing that would make this better would be if he could see Juno's face, trace his lovely, beloved features with eyes or fingers, but it's enough for now to have Juno's forehead pressed against his spine, his low moans filling Peter's ears. It's enough.

It doesn't take much, not when Juno is already so keyed up—gods know Peter had been quicker off the mark than usual too, so he's not surprised when Juno's breath hitches and he gives a few longer, harder thrusts into the warm, slick space between Peter's thighs and

then goes tense, trembling, his arm holding tight and squeezes all the air out of Peter's chest as he comes. He's nearly silent in the way he goes when he is really, *really* desperate for it, and Peter aches a little in sympathy. He clutches tight on Juno's hand, their fingers still tangled, and murmurs a soft litany of Juno's name and gentle praises as he rides it out.

It's a long minute before Juno finally goes limp against Peter's back, and Peter gingerly extracts himself and cleans up with a perfunctory wipe from a tissue before he crawls back into bed and gently manhandles Juno into lying on his back. Then he sprawls himself as expansively as possible across Juno's chest and just… basks.

One of Juno's hands comes up and lazily strokes down Peter's back, the skin warming wherever Juno's fingers go. "Love you," Juno says, very quiet.

"I love you too," Peter says. He kisses Juno's chest, because it's there and he *loves* it. Loves every part of Juno, every inch of skin and all the lovely workings beneath it, his warmth and his breath and the heartbeat that he can hear echoing through those sturdy ribs.

"Glad you're back." Juno's hand stills in the middle of Peter's back and presses down, just lightly, as if he's reassuring himself that Peter is really there. "I missed you."

"You said. I missed you too."

"You said." Peter can't see Juno's face, his own cheek pressed to Juno's skin as it is, but he can hear the smile. "What now?"

"Who cares?"

Juno laughs a little, and Peter is lifted with the movement of Juno's chest, feels the sound move through him. "Amen to that."

They're going to have to get up in a moment, Peter knows. They need to clean up properly and get dressed again and go check in with Rita and, by extension, Buddy. There's work to be done, and wasting a half-hour fucking was probably ill-advised. But they can spare five more minutes. "Five more minutes?" Peter says.

When Juno sighs, he knows that Juno is thinking the same things about their responsibilities. But he says, "Yeah. Five more minutes."

That's all Peter needs.

Chapter 9

Things resolve themselves, more or less. Juno keeps his nose out of the weird politics insanity that unspools over the next few weeks—Ramses was enough politics for one lifetime, in his opinion. Instead he basks in having Peter back, and being properly reunited with the other members of the Carte Blanche crew, and not having to be on edge every damn minute. He checks in with the people he's gotten to know during his time on Brahma, and he gets ready to leave.

Cassandra goes into labour three days after Kasim's attempted execution and Ophion's death, which is still somewhat premature but not worryingly so. Juno stays away for the first day, letting her and her husband have their privacy, but he goes to visit the day after that. Cassandra still looks exhausted, lying in a hospital bed, but there's a smile on her face and Jason, by her side, is radiant with joy. The baby is lying against Cassandra's chest, skin-to-skin, with a blanket draped over them for warmth and modesty, and Juno smiles at them, a little awkwardly.

"Come in, Juno, it's okay," Cassandra says, beckoning him close with a small gesture clearly meant not to disturb the baby. The baby, whose face is turned toward Juno; their eyes, hazy blue, are open but unfocused, and they're resting quietly for the moment.

"They're beautiful," Juno says, resisting the urge to reach out and touch the fine, silky hair on that tiny head.

"Yes," Cassandra sighs, and reaches up to lay her hand on her baby's back. Even her small palm covers nearly the entire lump under the blanket. "A son."

"Does he have a name yet?"

Cassandra and Jason exchange a glance. "We…" Cassandra hesitates, then says, "We were considering *Peter*."

Juno swallows. "He'd be honoured." Coming from them, anyway. Juno has a suspicion that this isn't the only newborn who's going to get named *Peter* in the next few years, but he knows that Peter and Jason have become friends. From a stranger, it's something Peter would probably resent, but not from these two. "I'll let him know."

"Thank you," Cassandra says, her smile returning. "Much as I'd have

liked to see his face, I suspect we'd only scare him off."

Jason leans forward to place his hand over Cassandra's, on tiny-Peter's back, his darker fingers lacing between hers. "Do tell us if he hates the idea. We have other options."

"Sure. I think it'll be fine,." Juno nods toward the small family. "He thinks highly of both of you."

"And that's why he couldn't come to visit?" Cassandra asks, a little sardonic. She looks embarrassed after she's said it, and Jason chuckles and leans in to kiss one of her blushing cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm sure he's busy."

"Right now, yeah," Juno says. "But maybe in a few days. Then again, I've always gotten the feeling that he's not great with little kids, and I bet he'd be even worse with babies, so maybe he'll just hide." He shrugs with a wry smile. "I'll let him know you wouldn't mind a visit,."

Cassandra nods. "I'll be here a while longer, then we're returning to quarters—at least for a while. Jason is looking for a home for us *outside* of the Enforcement compound."

"That sounds like it's probably for the best." Jason is in the running to become the next head of government, or at least some branch of it, being one of the few high-ranked members of Enforcement's hierarchy who was neither sympathetic to Ophion nor actively a traitor. But those are the politics that Juno has been avoiding like his life depends on it—and it might, people are already making nervous noises about assassinations. So instead, he steps closer to the bed and reaches out a careful hand. "May I?"

"Of course," Cassandra says, and slides her and Jason's joined hands a little lower, giving Juno room to slide his fingertips very gently over the baby's head. "You can hold him, if you'd like."

"No, no," Juno says, cupping tiny-Peter's skull in his palm, with as much tenderness and care as he'd use with his own Peter. The baby makes a very soft noise, and he can feel himself melting. "It's okay. He should… he should be with his mother."

"If you're sure."

The baby has dark hair, like Cassandra; Juno can imagine what a heartbreaker this kid is going to be when he grows up. Both his

parents are beautiful, with equal grace of spirit and strength of will, and if they impart even half of that then this small namesake of the Angel of Brahma is going to change the world one day—or maybe just one person's world, and even that much would be *so* much. God knows Juno feels that way about his *own* Peter, who swept in and turned everything upside down, transformed every day that Juno has lived since they met—and Juno wouldn't give back a single one of those days, no matter that there have been hard times as well as good ones. Every minute of it was worth it.

Suddenly overcome, Juno clears his throat and says, "Can I—would you mind if I spoke a blessing? I don't practice the same customs that you have here on Brahma, but—"

"It would be our honour," Jason interrupts. "Please."

"Right." Juno hasn't done this in a while—doesn't do it often at all—but he's known the *shehecheyanu* his entire life and the Hebrew words come easily to his lips. Then he translates, for Jason and Cassandra's benefit, "Blessed are You, Fountain of Blessings, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us here, to this day." He has to clear his throat again, and then adds, "It's… a thing we say as a blessing on new and wonderful things, things we're grateful that we lived to see."

"Well," says Jason. His voice is a little choked up, and Cassandra has tears in her eyes as well. "Thank you, Juno. I… I find that I'm grateful too, to be here."

"Yeah. Me too," Juno says, then laughs a little. "Uh, obviously." He lifts his hand away from tiny-Peter's warm skin, and watches as the baby's eyes drift closed. "I've got to get back to *my* Peter, before he goes insane trapped in yet another meeting, but… thanks for letting me visit. And if I don't see you again before we leave, good luck with… everything."

"Yes." Cassandra's smile is very soft. "You too, Juno Steel. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," he says, very sincerely, and then waves at them and vanishes out the door.

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That's probably the hardest parting. He doesn't, in the end, see Cassandra and Jason after that, though he does tell Peter about his tiny namesake and he knows that Peter goes to see them—knows

because Peter comes back very verklempt and a little frantic, not quite sure what to do with himself. Which is fair; that's about how Juno feels in the presence of tiny babies, and he didn't even have the added complication of this one being *named after him*.

Juno meets with Eshe a few more times, gets to see her in action in the meeting rooms on his brief visits there and see the way she goes cold and closed off and so very hurt under Abraham's regretful gaze. Juno considers saying something, and then remembers how much use it had been to say something to her the last time he'd gotten a glimpse of how fucked up she was and decides to cut his losses. Instead, he takes a day, a few days before they're set to depart, and goes to visit Miri Marshall.

Jet gives him directions to her mechanic's shop, where she's settled back in now that Enforcement is being dismantled and she's no longer under threat of being disappeared. Back in her natural habitat, she's less defensive, and bustles him inside and watches with amusement as her partner, a tall man with an open face named Shay, shoves a cup of tea into Juno's hands. A sip is enough for Juno to discover that the tea is *horribly* bitter, though it fades to an interesting aftertaste, and Ms. Marshall—"For fuck's sake, call me Miri."—laughs at the look on his face.

"You play that one on all your guests, don't you," Juno guesses, and she just grins back.

They pass a nice few hours, getting to know one another a little bit outside of the horrible circumstances under which they'd met, and it turns out that Miri is still sharp and a little bitter herself, but warm, funny, and very gentle when she touches Shay. She'll recover from the whole ordeal just fine, Juno decides, and chokes down the last of his tea in feigned politeness just to see her laugh again. Things could've gone very differently for her, but instead, she and all the other bystanders on Brahma are going to get their lives back, and more beside.

As the afternoon wears on and Juno is beginning to think about excusing himself, there's a tap at the door and someone says, "Miri, are you—oh, I'm so sorry, you have a guest."

"It's alright Eron, come in," Miri says, with an indulgent wave, and rises to greet the person standing in the doorway with a kiss on the cheek. They're about Juno's own age, with a broad, handsome face and straight shoulders. Something is familiar—ah, right, he'd seen a

photo of Eron King in Miri's file, all those weeks ago, and moreover…

Juno tilts his head, and says, "Do you have a brother?"

Eron straightens up a little from where they'd bent to receive Miri's kiss, frowning. It occurs to Juno belatedly that that was probably a very rude question to ask a complete stranger, especially one he *knows* was exiled from their home and therefore probably has all sorts of issues with their family. But before he can backpedal and apologize, Eron says, "I did—an older one, Aedan. Why?"

"You look a lot like him." Juno sets down his teacup, the clink of it against the table nearly masking the sharp indrawn breaths of all three of the other people in the room, and stands up, brushing invisible dust off his coat. "I should probably get going, but I'm glad I ran into you."

Eron swallows hard, closes their eyes. "Is he still alive?"

"I don't actually know," Juno has to admit. "Last time I saw him, he was keeping constables from shooting me in the back, though, so… you could probably ask the Rebellion. Or… whatever they're calling themselves now."

Those dark eyes, very much unlike Aedan's clear blue, shoot open again. "He—what? Aedan is a constable."

"He was." Juno smiles. "When push came to shove, he knew what was right, and he definitely saved my life. Me and my crew, we're leaving the planet in a few days and we're sure as fuck never coming back—no offence—"

"None taken," Miri says.

"—but if you do find your brother, pass on my thanks."

"I… I will," Eron says, looking shell-shocked. "Thank you. I thought—well. I'm sure you can imagine."

"I can." Juno steps forward and lays a hand on their shoulder briefly. "I suspect he'd very much like to see you again. Take it from someone who misses his own brother a lot."

Eron nods once, firmly. "I'm sorry for your loss. But… thank you again."

Juno smiles, thinks of the irony, and offers the same words to Eron that he'd offered to Jason and Cassandra: "Don't mention it."

He says goodbye to Miri and Shay as well, and then makes his way out the door, thinking as he goes about the lives they've touched here on Brahma. He hadn't come thinking to make a personal difference—he'd come because this was important to Peter. But, as usual, he couldn't help getting involved. At least it had worked out this time.

And, with goodbyes to Miri Marshall and to the Thalases, that leaves only one unresolved issue. The night before they're set to depart, the crew of the Carte Blanche have a family meeting in Buddy and Vespa's quarters in the Rebellion tunnels, which are rapidly clearing out as people return to their homes on the surface. They go over their plans for the next few weeks, the supplies that Jet and Rita have acquired to restock the ship, all the final checks they go through before they leave a planet and prepare for their next job. Peter looks exhausted, wrung-out, all the way through the meeting, paying even less attention as Buddy talks than usual, but none of them begrudge him; he's spent a lot of time with Mag these past three weeks, shadowing his old mentor and watching as Brahma's new order falls into place. Juno doesn't know if anyone else in the crew knows why that's been so hard on him, but *Juno* knows, and he's watched with banked fury as Mag's overbearing manner and jovial manipulation took its toll. Peter hasn't been sleeping well lately; he wakes Juno with his nightmares more nights than not. They've had a lot of whispered conversations, none of which helped as much as Juno would have liked. But he's determined to do something about it.

With Peter's exhaustion being what it is, it's not a surprise that he excuses himself as soon as Buddy says they're done. He rises from his seat with only an approximation of his usual grace and rests his hand on the back of Juno's chair, looking down at him askance.

"I wanted to talk to Vespa about something," Juno tells him, and accepts the kiss that Peter bends to press against his mouth. "I'll come to bed in a few."

"Okay," Peter says, and Juno knows he really *is* tired if he doesn't even question it. He wanders away, all of them watching him go with concerned eyes

As soon as Buddy's door is shut behind Peter, Juno turns to Vespa and says, "He agreed."

“Great,” Vespa says, and a knife appears in her hand. “Goodnight, children!”

Juno snorts. “Goodnight, *mom*.”

Vespa points the knife at him. “If you call me that again, the next one’s gonna be for *you*, jackass.”

“Uh-huh, sure.” Juno rises, stretches his arms above his head. If Vespa hasn’t stabbed him any of the last million times she threatened to, she’s not gonna do it now. “I’m going to bed.”

“When we get back to the Carte Blanche we should have a movie night and a biiiiig cuddle pile so that we can all lie on Mistah Nureyev and squish all the sadness out!” Rita declares, stretching her arms out wide to illustrate how much *biiiiig* is.

“Sounds good, Rita,” Juno agrees. “We’ll plan it after departure tomorrow.”

“Yeah!! Anyway, g’night Mistah Steel!”

Juno receives a softer round of goodnights from Buddy and Jet, returns them, and then heads out himself. He’s sure Peter is back in their rooms by now, part way through his bedtime routine and wearing pajamas, and soon they’ll be crawling beneath the covers together, and Juno will wrap Peter in his arms and hold him as close and safe as he can as the night passes them by. No telling what’s out there, he thinks with a smile. One more night on Brahma, and then in the morning, they’ll… disappear.

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Deep in the Brahmese Rebellion compound, a man opens his eyes to the dark of his room and sighs. “Come to finish the job at last, Pete? I didn’t think you had it in you to kill your family, but then I suppose I’ve underestimated you before.”

In the blackness, someone snorts, derisive. “Nice try, but you ain’t Peter’s family any more, shithead. We are.”

A rustle of cloth as someone goes for a weapon; a brief struggle.

A gasp.

Silence.

End Notes

Thank you all for reading. Let me know what you thought! Comments and kudos are both welcome, as always, but comments do feed the writing machine.

Here is the link to the lovely Taylor's art post on their Tumblr, which you should definitely go reblog and give love to! Thank you again so much for the art, Taylor.

And here is Sarcasm's art!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!